

AND A LITTLE STORY SHALL LEAD THEM:
ONLINE VIDEO TESTIMONY AS LEADERSHIP IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

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ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Alban Institute
ASQ	<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i>
BI	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
CCO	Communicative Constitution of Organizations
CEB	Common English Bible
CM	<i>Communication Monographs</i>
FP	Fortress Press
HR	<i>Human Relations</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OUP	Oxford University Press
OVT	Online Video Testimony
UNDP	University of Notre Dame Press
URL	Universal Resource Locator
VLC	Virtual Leader Construct
WJK	Westminster John Knox

GLOSSARY

Antennarrative. Fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and pre-narrative speculation, a bet that a proper narrative can be constituted.

Asynchronous. Occurring out of order or not at the same time; used frequently to describe internet-based communication where data flows intermittently, not in a steady stream.

B-roll. A filmmaking technique where additional footage is shown over primary action or dialogue to supplement the story.

Constitutive Communication of Organization (CCO). A developing communication paradigm that views communication as a building block in organizations.

Communication flow. A field of messages within an organization.

Communication stream. A discrete channel of online content accessible by a user.

Composition. In film, the way visual elements are laid out on screen.

Coorientation. In CCO theory, a concept introduced by James Taylor and Elizabeth Van Every to describe the “simultaneous relationship to something to be done, and to others with whom one is doing it”.

Denouement. The final act of a play or narrative, where conflict is resolved or explained.

Epic Story. According to John O’Neill’s typology, a story high in color and need-fulfillment.

Facebook. A social networking platform launched in 2004.

Flickr. A photo-sharing social media platform.

Fourth wall. In film, an imaginary wall that separates the audience from the on-screen action; directly addressing the audience during a film is known as “breaking the fourth wall.”

Instagram. A photo-sharing social media platform, primarily accessed on a mobile device.

Mise-en-scene. French for “placing on stage.” In film, it refers to everything that appears on screen, including composition, sets, props, actors, costumes, and lighting.

Narrative fidelity. A measure of how well a story corresponds to real life.

Online Video Testimony (OVT). A 2-5 minute video clip produced by a local church that depicts someone ‘in her own words’ telling a biographical story.

Problem-saturated stories. In narrative therapy, stories that trap individuals and families in patterns of self-destructive behavior.

Rational-world paradigm. A worldview that assumes humans are rational beings who solve problems exclusively with reason.

Safe story. An incomplete story that ignores significant facts about a congregation or church.

Server. A computer designed especially for delivering content over the Internet.

Springboard story. A story that enables a leap in understanding by engaging “the little voice” inside a listener’s head.

Talking head. A film technique that uses a close shot of a person’s face directly addressing the camera and usually includes little other action.

Terse storytelling. An abbreviated and succinct simplification of the story in which parts of the plot, some of the characters, and segments of the sequence of events are left to the hearer’s imagination.

Unique outcomes. In narrative therapy, events which fall outside the dominant storyline.

Universal Resource Locator (URL). Network address of a webpage or other internet resource. Commonly known as a website address.

Vimeo. An online video-sharing website popular with filmmakers and marketers.

Virtual Leader Construct (VLC). A non-human image of a leader who is purposefully created through story to be a leader within the organization

Weak story. A story about a church or congregation that is fixated on long-gone status, prestige, or power.

YouTube. One of the most well-known video sharing websites on the Internet.

ABSTRACT

Many evangelical churches produce Online Video Testimonies (OVTs), 2-5 minute clips depicting someone ‘in her own words’ telling a biographical story. Interpreting OVTs from an organizational communication perspective reveals they do some of the same things human leaders do: define reality, align relationships, refine identities, and assign meanings. Nearly two thirds of the 100 largest churches in the United States were found to use OVTs, and a content analysis of videos from these churches reveal a number of common themes, elements, and storytelling tropes. Seven churches were selected for closer study, resulting in a list of best-practices for producing OVTs.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: A NEW PHENOMENON

In recent years, many large evangelical churches have begun producing and distributing Online Video Testimonies (OVTs). Variations of OVTs are common and have been widely used for decades. Many churches, for instance, use video to promote or recap ministry events, while other churches collect and distribute text-based testimonies for print publications. A few churches even use dedicated ‘story teams’ to produce and distribute cinematic short films (not unlike drama teams that stage live presentations).

But OVTs represent a patently new phenomenon. OVTs are video clips that are usually 2-5 minutes in length that allow someone ‘in her own words’ to recount a climactic episode like a conversion, a period of intense spiritual growth, surviving a serious medical condition, or overcoming an addiction. These videos are narrated in the first person and presented as ostensibly autobiographical material, but they are produced by church leaders who edit, cut, and paste multiple shots to contour the overall story arc. OVTs are distributed over the Internet and sometimes shown during worship services.

Several factors have contributed to the increased popularity of OVTs. First, the cost of video equipment has fallen dramatically in recent years. Virtually any church can now afford a decent camera and basic editing software, enabling widespread production of high-quality video clips. Secondly, broadband Internet access has become a staple for much of the world, and video sharing services such as YouTube and Vimeo make distribution and consumption of video a commonplace activity. Thirdly, the rise of megachurches and multisite churches make video an increasingly useful communication tool. As churches grow numerically and spread out geographically, church members have fewer opportunities to meet and become well acquainted with one other. Videos allow church members to establish and maintain relationships across space

and time. Fourthly, interest in ‘story’ has blossomed in recent years. Scores of new books, websites, conferences, and Bible studies have turned ‘story’ into a buzzword, leading many church members to reflect on their own life narratives. Finally, the act of sharing one’s story or testimony is a practice with a long history in Christianity. Believers have told their stories to each other for centuries in worship and evangelistic settings, and in many ways, OVTs seem to be the 21st century version of this ancient practice.

In spite of their increasing popularity and similarity with more traditional practices, OVTs raise significant theoretical and theological questions that have yet to be adequately addressed. Although presented as an individual’s personal story, OVTs are often used as promotional material on behalf of the local church and they circulate on Internet social media platforms outside communal or relational contexts. In other words, OVTs are sites of contested meaning where individuals’ personal stories and organizational messages intermingle in unexamined ways. Thus a broader interpretive frame is needed to fully understand OVTs.

In particular, an organizational communication perspective can provide valuable insight into how these videos function in local churches. Traditionally, communication has been understood as a byproduct of organizational life, as something an organization *does*, or as a tool used to meet organizational goals. In this view, the organization is like a machine where communication has a mechanistic cause and effect relationship with other aspects of organizational life, while the role of leadership is merely to ensure the right people get the right messages at the right time. But since it is only a tool, communication is fundamentally discrete from the organization itself and, hypothetically, another tool could be substituted without profoundly altering the fabric of the organization. Similarly, communication artifacts like memos, stories, email, and conversations can be extracted from organizational life to reveal important facts about culture, core values, and social dynamics. Stories in particular have frequently served as fodder for scholars in an attempt to discover “what the organization is really like” by reading

between the lines to understand how underlying social or cultural realities yielded specific communicative outcomes.

More recent perspectives have challenged these assumptions by opting instead to see communication as a constructive agent, not just as a byproduct of organizational life. In this view, known as Communicative Constitution of Organization (CCO), the organization is not merely an inert container where communication takes place. Instead, policies, decisions, strategies, procedures, negotiations, symbols, speech, stories, and other communicative acts are seen as building blocks of the organization – or put another way, organizations are produced (and reproduced) by communication. This is not to suggest that physical ‘stuff’ like buildings and goods have no bearing on organizational life. Certainly they do – but CCO theory argues that these physical attributes of organizational life are not naturally occurring phenomena. They are arranged by human decision-makers who imbue them with meaning by communicating with one another – whether verbally in one-on-one interactions or via proxies such as documents, blueprints, and advertising campaigns. CCO scholars argue that it’s not enough to merely study how this communicative activity flows *within* an organization. Attention must be paid instead to how this communication is continually creating and recreating the very essence of the organization itself.

An organizational communication perspective informed by CCO theory illuminates the creative potential of OVTs. These videos are more than a window into the soul of a local church, as they do more than simply reflect what already exists. Instead they are rich communicative acts that shape and reshape the values, priorities, and assumptions of a congregation.

Going one step farther, CCO theory also rejects any simple notion of agency as it relates to OVTs. On the surface, an OVT appears to be autobiographical in nature, as if the subject in the video were sitting in the same room telling their story to you, the viewer. But there are at least two agents involved in construing an OVT, as most are heavily edited by video production staff, and some may have been subjected to strict theological or content filters. In fact, every OVT by

definition has undergone some sort of editorial review by virtue of appearing in a church's official communication channel.

The question of agency is further complicated when considering that many viewers access OVTs through asynchronous online channels far removed from the social world where the videos originated. An OVT can circulate on YouTube indefinitely, for instance, and garner views many years after the video was originally produced. Any influence such OVTs may have on the viewer cannot in this case be properly attributed to human or organizational agents. The viewer would likely be unable to identify the creator of the video, while local church leadership may never know who watches their OVTs. The situation holds true for many church members as well. Even if the viewer is an active part of a large evangelical megachurch, he or she may never meet any of the church leaders involved in the production of the video. Thus it could be argued that an OVT demonstrates a degree of its own agency, performing certain leadership functions on its own – or at least doing some of the same things human leaders do. For instance, as this thesis-project argues, OVTs define organizational reality, align and reconfigure relationships, refine individual and organizational identities, and assign symbolic meanings within organizational culture. Though each of these tasks are traditionally attributed to flesh-and-blood leaders, CCO theory raises the possibility that stories might be able to accomplish these same tasks all on their own, apart from direct human agency.

This raises important theological issues as well. OVTs are stories that often resemble or explicitly recall Biblical material. However, the nature of this relationship with Scripture isn't always straightforward. For one thing, few readers ever consider the symbolic or social function of stories within the world of Scripture itself. When the prophet Nathan confronts King David with a story, for instance, or when the Apostle Paul recalls his conversion experience in his letter to the Galatian church, few readers pause to consider how those stories might have functioned in their original context, while even fewer have examined how the meaning of those stories has evolved over time. Take Paul's conversion, for example. The New Testament records several versions of

Paul's conversion story, and the various accounts are not without nagging discrepancies. Yet one version of Paul's experience (specifically the account in Acts 9) has been celebrated for centuries as *the* prototypical conversion story, providing a countless number of neophytes with a narrative model after which to pattern their own understanding of Christian conversion. But the narrative model presented in Acts 9 does not typify *all* conversion experiences, and many converts throughout history have unsuccessfully sought their own "Damascus Road encounter", as if Paul's experience is necessary for all other followers of Jesus. This is partly due to the mistaken communicative assumption that Paul's story is a reflection of an essential organizational reality underpinning the Church: Paul's conversion happened a certain way, thus his experience reveals something intrinsic about what *every* conversion should look like. But if the biblical stories can be rescued from modern communicative assumptions that view stories as inert reflections of underlying social realities, readers might begin to see how OVTs can likewise function as dynamic agents that have the power to shape the contemporary local church.

Finally, there is an important practical reason for this research. Most church communication departments simply do not have the luxury of devoting resources to sustained theological reflection about video production methodology. In even the largest evangelical churches, communication departments are understaffed, overworked, and tasked with disseminating impossibly large amounts of information in ways that are timely, targeted, and compelling. As a result, new tools and ideas like OVTs are embraced without fully considering what impact they may have on a congregation. If communication does indeed (re)produce organizational life as CCO scholars suggest, then careful scrutiny is needed to understand how OVTs shape the social, cultural, and theological landscape of evangelical churches.

Statement of Research Topic

In light of these theoretical, theological, and practical issues, this thesis-project explored the role and use of OVTs within large evangelical churches in the United States. This research was

conceived as an exercise in practical theology, or as a way to enhance ministry practice in the Church. Swinton and Mowat describe practical theology as “critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God’s redemptive practices in, to and for the world.”¹

According to Richard Osmer there are four core tasks of practical theology: 1) *descriptive*, or collecting data to describe a phenomenon; 2) *interpretive*, or exploring social science theory to understand and explain a phenomenon; 3) *normative*, engaging Scripture and theological concepts as they relate to a phenomenon; and 4) *pragmatic*, plotting a path forward that best displays faithful practice.² Thus this project will be guided by the following four researchable questions, which relate directly to Osmer’s four tasks:

- Q1. What can be learned about OVTs produced by large evangelical churches, particularly from recurring themes, tropes, and other structural elements? (*Descriptive*)
- Q2. How do OVTs function as organizational communication within churches in terms of defining reality, aligning relationships, refining identities, and assigning meanings? (*Interpretive*)
- Q3. In what ways can the use of OVTs be evaluated as faithful to and congruent with the witness of Scripture? (*Normative*)
- Q4. What best practices can help churches gain the most benefit from the production and distribution of OVTs? (*Pragmatic*)

Research Methods and Project Outline

In order to address these research questions, this thesis-project proceeded as a mixed methods research project with two major phases. The first phase of this study gathered OVTs from the 100 largest churches in the United States (as identified by Outreach Magazine). OVTs from these churches were then transcribed and subjected to content analysis to further understand their structure and composition (Q1). In the second research phase, seven churches were selected for

¹ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 6.

² Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

closer study as discrete case study research sites. Interviews and site visits were used to identify goals and motivations behind OVT production, and data from each research site was compared and contrasted to ‘triangulate’ emerging issues and themes (Q2 and Q4). This process continually dialogued with Biblical and theological resources to enrich the resulting analysis (Q3).

The following chapters will expand this research plan. Chapter 2 surveys the fields of organizational communication and organizational storytelling to provide a theoretical foundation for this thesis-project. Specifically, the chapter traces the development of the CCO perspective to show how stories do some of the same things flesh-and-blood leaders do, such as define reality, align relationships, refine identity, and assign meaning.

Chapter 3 examines stories in Scripture to show how they functioned in their original social contexts, as well as how they have been (mis)understood in Christian history. Particularly, this chapter will examine the story Nathan told to King David in 2 Samuel 12, the parables told by Jesus in the Gospels, and the various accounts of Paul’s conversion recorded in Acts and in the New Testament epistles. This chapter will also distill insights from the biblical material in an attempt to construct a theological framework with which OVTs can be understood.

Chapter 4 details the methodological considerations that guided this thesis-project, while chapter 5 presents the findings from both major phases of research. Finally, chapter 6 draws together conclusions from this research by offering theological and practical guidelines for the future production and distribution of OVTs, including a list of best-practices to enable faithful ministry practice.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL CONTEXT: STORIES DO THINGS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Stories are everywhere in organizations, from company histories and strategic planning narratives to hallway gossip and the whispers about the “real” reason why so-and-so resigned. For much of the 20th century, researchers ignored this rich story-world within organizations, opting instead to focus on more practical matters like change management and leadership development. Walter Fisher called this a “rational-world paradigm” that saw humans as rational beings, argument as the paradigmatic mode of human communication, and the world as a set of logical puzzles that can be solved through appropriate use of reason.¹ Although this mindset had dominated organizational thinking since Aristotle, Fisher argued that this paradigm failed to account for a great deal of human behavior especially within organizations. Humans are essentially storytellers – *homo narrans* – who make sense of the world by creating and living in narrative accounts of reality. As such, human behavior is directed less by the rules of abstract logic than by a narrative-based rationality wherein “the world as we know it is a set of stories that must be chosen among in order for us to live life in a process of continual re-creation.”²

Fisher’s observation sets the stage for the discussion in this chapter. Although stories are becoming more prominent as a focus of study in organizational life, most readers still fall back on assumptions rooted in a rational-world paradigm. Even many scholars make this mistake by assuming that stories simply reflect core values or reveal a static organizational

¹ Walter Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 59. See also his earlier work “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” *CM* 51 (March 1984): 1-22. Karl Weick and Larry Browning provide a helpful review of the implications of Fisher’s work. See their “Argumentation and Narration in Organizational Communication,” *1986 Yearly Review of the Journal of Management* 12 no. 12 (December 1986): 243-259.

² Fisher, *Communication as Narration*, 65.

culture. This chapter argues, on the contrary, that stories are not simple distillations of organizational realities. Instead they are active contributors to the fundamental shape of an organization. Stories constitute organizations, producing and reproducing the very organization itself.

In fact, a recent article by Ken Parry and Hans Hansen suggests that stories can behave like flesh-and-blood leaders within organizations – or at the very least, stories *do* many of the same things that leaders do.⁵ Consider this story taken from the website of FedEx, a well-known logistics company:

The FedEx courier did not intend to go swimming during the work day, especially with harsh winds and rain covering much of Honolulu, Hawaii. However, when a gust of wind plucked a package from the back of his truck and flung it into the ocean, James did not think twice about diving in. James recovered the package and, soaking wet, delivered it to the customer.⁶

This story is certainly congruent with the company's motto, "Absolutely, Positively Whatever It Takes", and implies that FedEx is an organization deeply devoted to customer service. On its surface, the story is offered as "proof" that FedEx is what it claims to be. But Parry and Hansen point out that this story doesn't merely depict an organization as it already is, as if FedEx were incapable of being a different sort of company with different priorities. FedEx employees are not by nature as dedicated as the courier James, nor must FedEx necessarily be a customer-focused service organization. Rather this story presents specific behaviors in such a way that members within the organization are compelled to imitate the courier. In other words, the story does more than describe activity – it directs it as well, much like a flesh-and-blood leader might do. "[Stories] begin to operate, do things, like leaders.... People follow the story more so than they follow the

⁵ Ken Parry and Hans Hansen, "The Organizational Story as Leadership," *Leadership* 3 no. 3 (2007): 281-300.

⁶ Reprinted in Parry and Hansen, "Organizational Story," 281.

person who composes or tells the story.”⁷ In fact, a story can take on a life of its own, behaving autonomously by demonstrating a degree of constructive agency within an organization.

The remainder of this chapter will unpack this idea. First, it will lay out the theoretical framework for the Communicative Constitution of Organizations perspective (CCO), which helps explain the mechanics behind how stories and other communication produce organizational reality. Secondly, it will argue that stories perform specific leadership functions within organizations: they define organizational reality, they align relationships, they refine individual and organizational identities, and they assign symbolic meanings within organizational culture. Finally this chapter will tie the discussion to Online Video Testimonies (OVTs) by showing ways they too might “do things” within local churches.

Before launching into the main section of the argument, however, a word of explanation is necessary about the nature of the local church as it relates to organizational research. This chapter understands the church as an organization, but this should not be read as a reductionist interpretation that ignores the theological nature of the church as the communion of saints supernaturally called by the Word of God to inaugurate and participate in the Kingdom of God. Such an interpretation diminishes the role of the Holy Spirit and disregards the impact of sin and sanctification on the life of the people. Yet inasmuch as the church is a mystical communion of saints, it is also a collection of human beings grounded in time and space. The social sciences have shown conclusively that humans have behavioral tendencies that direct social activity in predictable ways, and the frameworks posited by the social sciences indeed offer a compellingly accurate picture of human activity. Furthermore, suggesting the church is an organization constituted by communication should not be read as a denial of “truth” or the existence of a spiritual reality beyond human activity. While some variations of CCO theory may reduce organizations to “nothing but communication”, it is not necessary to make such a leap. There is no

⁷ Parry and Hansen, “Organizational Story,” 282.

inherent problem in looking to the social sciences for help understanding the behavior of human beings in local churches – as long as insights from these fields are normed by Scripture and the broader experience of the Church throughout history.

Communicative Constitution of Organizations: A New Paradigm

In order to disentangle stories from Fisher’s rational-world paradigm, it is helpful to review recent developments within the field of organizational communication theory. Namely, these developments can be grouped under the heading, “Communicative Constitution of Organization” (or CCO). Linda Putnam and colleagues write that, whereas “initial research in organizational communication treated organizations as objects, reified identifies, or containers,” many scholars now view communication as a constructive activity that shapes the character of the broader organization.⁸

Examples of this initial work in organizational research – especially related to organizational storytelling – are many. For instance, John Meyer developed a method to extract core values from stories told within an organization. In his study, he invited employees of a childcare facility to tell stories so he could discover the “moral” in each story or the “clear reason for being told”.⁹ Other researchers used stories to identify characteristics common across all organizations. Joanne Martin and colleagues, for instance, identified seven common story types that circulate within all organizations. They went on to argue these story types are used in some combination by every organization to express its own unique character.¹⁰

⁸ Linda Putnam, Anne Nicotera and Robert McPhee, “Introduction,” in *Building Theories of Organization*, ed. Linda Putnam and Anne Nicotera (New York: Routledge, 2009), 5.

⁹ John Meyer, “Tell Me a Story: Eliciting Organizational Values from Narratives,” *Communication Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 210-224. Quotes were taken from page 214. See also Carol Hansen and William Kahnweiler, “Storytelling: An Instrument for Understanding the Dynamics of Corporate Relationships,” *HR* 46 no. 12 (December 1993): 1391-1408. In this study, the researchers used stories to understand subcultures within a corporate setting by generating “psychological profiles” from story data.

¹⁰ Joanne Martin, et al, “The Uniqueness Paradox in Organizational Stories,” *ASQ* 28 (1983): 438-453.

A few scholars took a slightly more sophisticated view of stories by exploring how they relate to social dynamics within organizations. Mary Helen Brown, for instance, noted that stories are told at all levels of organizational life, but the nature of these stories changes as newcomers are assimilated into the organization. Brown interviewed nursing home employees and recorded stories they told about their employer. She then sorted stories by stage of socialization and discovered that in the earliest stages of assimilation employees told stories as simple sequences of events. But during later stages of socialization, employees articulated “the connection that those events had for the organization through the use of morals” and “were capable of taking sets of like events and collapsing them into a general narrative form which was representative of a facet of organizational culture.”¹¹ Although Brown concluded that stories correlate to employees’ knowledge of and commitment to the organization’s values – as newcomers progress through the assimilation process, they become increasingly able to describe “what the organization is like”¹² – it remains unclear what kind of *causal* relationship exists between storytelling and organizational assimilation. Does the evolution of one’s stories propel the employee through the assimilation process or is the nature of one’s stories a byproduct of one’s social location within the organization?

Although these kinds of studies raised interesting questions, Michael Pacanowsky and Nick O’Donnell-Trujillo balked at the flat, mechanistic assumptions behind the prevailing understandings of organizational communication of their day. Writing in the early 1980s they declared that

the task of traditional organizational scholars [up to now has been to] isolate the variables instrumental in determining the values of outcomes variables, and relate them in some sort

¹¹ Mary Helen Brown, “That Reminds Me of a Story: Speech Action in Organizational Socialization,” *The Western Journal of Speech Communication* 49 (Winter 1985): 33.

¹² Brown, “Speech Action,” 38.

of causal theory, so that managers can manipulate organizational effectiveness by bringing their administrative powers to bear on those crucial instrumental variables.¹³

This “causal theory” ostensibly helped managers manipulate communication variables to increase productivity, profits, or efficiency. While better communication might improve organizational output and so-called communication breakdowns may adversely affect the organization’s bottom line, this theory saw communication as little more than a tool. Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo challenged this assumption, noting simply that communication was more than a necessary byproduct of work: “more things are going on in organizations than getting the job done.”¹⁴ Instead, they developed what they called a “cultural approach” to organizational studies, arguing that the outcome of communication is not merely organizational productivity, but the organization itself. To explain their theory, they borrowed the metaphor of a spider web from anthropologist Clifford Geertz. A cultural “web of significance” is spun as people go about the business of making sense of their world – that is, when they communicate with each other. The web is “the residue of the communication process. It is the resultant structure – the sense that is made of the account of reality – that body of knowledge that is drawn upon as a resource for explaining and making sense of new experiences.”¹⁵

Linda Smircich extended this cultural approach into organizational studies throughout the 1980s and 90s, as did Linda Putnam and Karl Weick.¹⁶ But it was not until the so-called discursive turn swept through the organizational sciences at the end of the 20th century when a constitutive perspective on organizational communication began to gather widespread attention. In fact, the

¹³ Michael Pacanowsky and Nick O-Donnell-Trujillo, “Communication and Organizational Cultures,” *The Western Journal of Speech Communication* 46 (Spring 1982):119.

¹⁴ Pacanowsky and O-Donnell-Trujillo, “Organizational Cultures,” 116.

¹⁵ Pacanowsky and O-Donnell-Trujillo, “Organizational Cultures,” 123.

¹⁶ See Linda Smircich, “Concepts of Culture and Organizational Analysis,” *ASQ* 28 (1983): 339-358 and Linda Putnam, “The Interpretive Perspective: An Alternative to Functionalism,” in *Communication and Organization: An Interpretive Approach*, ed. Linda Putnam and Michael Pacanowsky (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1983). Karl Weick’s work will be explored more fully below.

year 2000 saw the publication of two influential works that significantly advanced CCO theory. First, a book by James Taylor and Elizabeth Van Every advocated a two-fold understanding of organizational communication. On the one hand, they argued, communication carries content as “a medium of transmission of information”. But at the same time, communication also structures “the community of work into what we usually think of as ‘the organization’”.¹⁷ Their complex theory introduced the idea of *coorientation*, a shorthand way to describe the “simultaneous relationship to something to be done, and to others with whom one is doing it”.¹⁸ Whenever two people agree to work on a task together, they form a triad of cooriented relationships: person A forms a relationship with person B, but person A and person B both form relationships with task X. When these three relationships are routinized, or *imbricated*, Taylor and Van Every suggest they become the basic building blocks of the organization. And as these triadic A–B–X relationships are scaled in size and complexity, people begin to interact reflexively with the relationship structures themselves, rather than with each other. Thus “the organization” is born through communication, or “the cycling back of the conversation onto itself, through the medium of the discourse it generates”.¹⁹

The second influential work published in 2000 was an article by Robert McPhee and Pamela Zaug who suggested organizational communication is best understood from the broader perspective of a *communication flow*, or field where messages interact.²⁰ According to McPhee

¹⁷ James Taylor and Elizabeth Van Every, *The Emergent Organization* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum: 2000), 32.

¹⁸ *The Emerging Organization* is a dense and complicated work but thankfully Taylor reworked and simplified the basics of the theory in “Organizing From the Bottom Up”, in *Building Theories of Organization*, edited by Linda Putnam and Anne Nicotera (New York: Routledge, 2009): 153-186. Quote taken from 155.

¹⁹ Taylor and Van Every, *Emergent Organization*, 95.

²⁰ Robert McPhee and Pamela Zaug, “Communicative Constitution of Organizations: A Framework for Explanation,” *The Electronic Journal of Communication* 10 no. 1 (2000). Reprinted in Linda Putnam and Anne Nicotera, *Building Theories of Organization*, 21-47. For the sake of stable page numbers, citations will be taken from the latter version.

and Zaug, there are four distinct, yet overlapping communicative flows within organizations, and each flow accomplishes a necessary task in the formation of the organization:

The four flows link the organization to its members (membership negotiation), to itself reflexively (self-structuring), to the environment (institutional positioning) [and] the fourth is used to adapt interdependent activity to specific work situations and problems (activity coordination).²¹

To understand communicative dynamics, analysts shouldn't focus on individual messages, which can contribute to one or more flows, or the granular relationships formed between organizational members. Instead, the broader flows themselves (and the interaction between the flows) are fundamentally constitutive for organizational life. As messages swirl through these fields, they synergize into a cohesive whole, or into what is commonly understood as an organization. Yet the mere existence of the four flows does not magically produce an organization; they must be explicitly interrelated in some way. If four conversations happen to take place simultaneously inside a bar, for instance, and if each conversation happens to include messages that correspond to the four flows so that all four are represented, this loose collection of communicative activity – though sharing time and space – would likely fall short of constituting an organization. On the contrary, the flows must interrelate in some way: “The four flows need to develop and share a realm of mutual topical relevance” and “the legitimate authority of self-structuring, relative to the other flows, [must be] recognized in the other flows”.²²

Moreover, it should be mentioned that McPhee and Zaug resist collapsing organizations into communication *only*, as if organizations are nothing *but* message flows. Certainly organizations contain buildings and other material goods that form cooriented relationships with organizational members. But McPhee and Zaug argue that material elements are best understood by their relative positioning within a communication flow, not by locating them along a network of cooriented triads. Communication flows make sense of material elements by organizing them

²¹ McPhee and Zaug, “Communicative Constitution,” 33.

²² McPhee and Zaug, “Communicative Constitution,” 42.

into a coherent structure and, at least in part, this is what distinguishes the flows from one another – one flow centers on aligning its members, another flow centers on elements present in its environment, and so forth.

This last point makes it clear that Taylor and Van Every's approach differs substantially from McPhee and Zaug's perspective. The latter approach tends to start from a macro-level view of organizational communication, understanding organizations as the product of a variety of messages and communicative activities, whereas the former begins with a micro-level view of the organization, exemplified by the A–B–X triad as the granular building block of an organization. Although these two perspectives appear to be at odds with one another, they are not mutually exclusive. In fact they can be seen as complementary, or as two sides of the same proverbial coin that effectively balance out each other's weaknesses. For instance, Taylor and Van Every don't adequately explain how a simple A–B–X triad 'scales up' to become a large multinational organization. But the four flows analytical framework, on the other hand, provides an intriguing model to explain how messages and flows interact to produce complex organizational structures. Similarly, McPhee and Zaug's four flows approach cannot yet provide a compelling explanation of the concrete mechanics of organizational formation. However, coorientation provides a theoretical model that grounds organizational formation in concrete human relationships, which avoids overly abstract forms of communication analysis.

François Cooren, a colleague of Taylor and Van Every, offers an intriguing middle road between the four flows perspective and the coorientation approach. Cooren has written a great deal about the agency of texts within organizations, and has argued persuasively that textual entities possess a kind of hybridized, "ghostly" agency in organizations. They are hybrid in the sense they are produced by human beings, but they also *do* things, participating alongside other agents on behalf of the organization. For example, human agents create signage to be placed in the lobby of a building, but that signage in turn "acts on behalf of the organization at large" by directing

visitors to check in with security personnel.²³ In this case, human and nonhuman agents work together to make the organization present in the world. Cooren calls this *incarnation*, a term borrowed from Christian theology to describe how organizations are personified or manifested in concrete ways. When human and nonhuman communicators work together, others instinctively understand they are interacting with the organization as a whole, not merely a single agent. When a visitor reads the sign in the building lobby and proceeds to check in with security personnel, she does not assume the sign is asking for its own benefit. Rather, she implicitly understands the sign is demonstrating a hybridized agency by speaking on behalf of someone else. Similarly, the visitor does not assume the sign necessarily speaks on behalf of any one individual, but on behalf of the entire organization. She does not check in with security personnel because a person (or a sign) asks her to do so – she does so because the organization asks her to. Thus Cooren argues that the organization is “the product of relationships between interacting spokespersons and ‘spokes-objects’ that act and/or speak on an organization’s behalf.”²⁴

As Cooren, McPhee and Zaug, and Taylor and Van Every have shown, the essence of an organization is not statically present, waiting to be reflected in human activity. Instead, organizations are created and recreated through communicative acts. Moreover, organizations have values, social dynamics, and core identities because they have been incarnated in a particular way, and as CCO theory points out, this incarnational work takes place through communication. Organizational identity, then, “is to be found in what we might think of as momentary communication practices and language use that can, in some circumstances, gain stability.”²⁵ The

²³ François Cooren, “Textual Agency: How Texts Do Things in Organizational Settings,” *Organization* 11 no. 3 (2004): 380. This title’s consonance with Austin’s *How to Do Things With Words* seems intentional.

²⁴ François Cooren, “The Coproduction of Organizational Presence: A Study of Médecins Sans Frontières in Action,” *HR* 6 no. 10 (2008): 1360.

²⁵ Matthew Koschmann, “The Communicative Constitution of Collective Identity in Interorganizational Collaboration,” *Management Communication Quarterly* 20 no. 10 (2012): 22-23.

act of speaking, producing a text, or sharing a story in an organization is not an inert event. Rather, communicative acts make the organization present in the world.

This overview of CCO theory illuminates the mechanics of Parry and Hansen's theory and, in turn, provides a helpful way to think about OVTs. The stories that circulate within an organization (or a church) mustn't be interpreted as mere reflections of preexisting organizational values. On the contrary, organizational values are constructed and incarnated by the ways the organization communicates. The next section will explore four specific ways stories do this work.

Stories Do Things in Organizations

This section expands the idea that organizations are constituted communicatively. As discussed in the previous section, this argument presupposes that an organization is not a static entity that is merely reflected in stories. Rather, stories are texts that incarnate the organization in the world. Furthermore, stories have a special kind of hybridized agency that allows them to act in much the same way as flesh and blood leaders in organizations. Stories mimic human leaders in four ways, or to put it differently, stories perform four leadership functions within organizations. First, stories *define* reality within organizations by framing and reframing equivocal experiences. Secondly, stories *align* relationships by legitimizing social configurations and policing organizational boundaries. Thirdly, stories *refine* individual and organizational identities by endorsing certain experiences, traits, and values. And fourthly, stories *assign* symbolic meanings within an organizational culture by modeling values and behaviors to be imitated by others within the organization.²⁶ There is of course a great deal of overlap between these four functions – that is,

²⁶ These four functions could perhaps be mapped onto McPhee and Zaug's four flows: roughly speaking, sensemaking corresponds to self-structuring, negotiation of social dynamics corresponds to membership negotiation, identity construction corresponds to institutional positioning, and managing meaning corresponds to activity coordination. However the intent of this chapter is not necessarily to advocate for McPhee and Zaug's typology, nor to confuse the issue by forcing two typologies into artificial agreement. Instead, the argument here focuses on what stories actually *do*, and any congruence with the four flows is acknowledged but ultimately viewed as ancillary to the primary discussion.

a story can perform multiple functions at once – but for the sake of analysis they will be examined individually.

Before exploring these functions two questions must be clarified. First, what exactly is meant by the term *story*? There are at least two primary meanings intended when scholars use the terms ‘narrative’ or ‘story’ in organizational studies. One, perhaps best exemplified by the writings of Barbara Czarniawska, looks at the overarching story of an organization.²⁷ This perspective understands organizational activity as a text that can be read and interpreted, and as such, researchers can apply literary analysis to learn about the inner workings of organizations. The other meaning assumed by the use of ‘story’ – and the primary meaning intended in this thesis-project – refers to the unit of discourse commonly understood as a narrative that circulates within an organization or is told by a particular person about organizational life. Following Browning and Morris, organizational stories display four key features:

- 1) They foreshadow and introduce a problem. Some situation arises that disrupts or complicates the normal flow of events.
- 2) They provide a sequential rendering of action that depicts an attempt to overcome a problem.
- 3) They achieve a sense of closure or denouement, even though the initial problem may not be fully resolved.
- 4) They invite, pronounce, or infer moral implications, though not always explicitly. Typically ‘the moral of the story’ will have present or future implications for listeners.²⁸

Browning and Morris are quick to point out that these four elements should not be read as a recipe, so to speak. The elements may be swapped, rearranged, reconfigured, and readapted *ad infinitum* in storytelling situations, which is precisely what lends storytelling its universal appeal.

Nevertheless these four elements are helpful in providing some analytical parameters around the common-sense understanding of story.

²⁷ See Barbara Czarniawski, *Narrating the Organization: Dramas of Institutional Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and *A Narrative Approach to Organizational Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998).

²⁸ Larry Browning and G. H. Morris, *Stories of Life in the Workplace: An Open Architecture for Organizational Narratology* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 32.

Secondly, what is so special about *organizational* stories? David Boje, who has perhaps had the most influence on the field of organizational storytelling over the past two decades, suggests that organizations are “collective storytelling systems in which the performance of stories is a key part of members’ sensemaking and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory.”²⁹ Adding the qualifier “organizational” does more than locate a story within a particular time and place. As CCO theory suggests, stories create the very organization itself. A story told within an organizational context can weave together the experiences of many individuals into an event in the life of a single entity – the organization. In other words, the organization does not exist outside of its stories. Without narrative glue, the organization unravels into an accidental succession of words, acts, buildings, people, and experiences. But through stories, these elements are made intelligible, and people are given the opportunity to become a part of something larger: the organization.

²⁹ David Boje, “Stories of the Storytelling Organization: A Postmodern Analysis of Disney as ‘Tamara-Land’,” *The Academy of Management Journal* 38, no. 4 (August 1995): 1000.

Stories Define Organizational Reality

Stories, much like human leaders, have enormous capacity to generate change by framing and reframing events in organizational life. According to Bolman and Deal, a *frame* is a mental model or set of assumptions and values “that you carry in your head to help you understand and negotiate a particular ‘territory’”.³⁰ Life in an organization of any size can be confusing and overwhelming as raw experiential data flows constantly in many directions. This raw data is *equivocal*, or without meaning, until it is framed by an interpretive grid. A frame is much like a mental map that organizational members use to make decisions about the world.

Social psychologist Karl Weick has spent decades researching how organizations create and change frames, a process he calls *sensemaking*.³¹ Picking up the cartography metaphor from Bolman and Deal, he writes,

There is some terrain that mapmakers want to represent, and they use various modes of projection to make this representation. What they map, however, depends on where they look, how they look, what they want to represent, and their tools for representation. ... There is no ‘One Best Map’ of a particular terrain. For any terrain there will be an indefinite number of useful maps.³²

Different frames, like different maps, can reveal new features of the organizational terrain while obscuring others. Depending on where one stands within the organization and which goals are espoused, there are many possible explanations for organizational events. In this sense, framing is a creative process that makes meaning for the organization by providing new lenses to interpret organizational events. New frames can spur change by enabling members to see new features of the organizational terrain. Stories, much like skilled flesh and blood leaders, thus do much more than provide new ways to think about old problems – they literally shape the way reality is

³⁰ Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, *Reframing Organizations*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 11.

³¹ See especially his major works *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, 2nd ed. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); *Sensemaking in Organizations*, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1995) and *Making Sense of the Organization* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001).

³² Karl Weick, *Making Sense*, 9.

experienced. In fact, frames are precognitive structures that shape the way reality is perceived before it can be critically examined: “Reality [is] an ongoing accomplishment that takes form when people make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves and their creations... People make sense of things by seeing a world on which they already imposed what they believe”.³³ As such, frames are practically invisible until they are contested by alternative interpretations. Much like a boundary line on a map, frames become so naturalized and taken for granted they become the *only* way to interpret reality. But a story, much like a skilled leader, can call a taken-for-granted interpretation into question by reframing organizational experience. In fact, Weick notes that the ‘textualizing’ of experience (via storytelling) is a key mechanism that drives the sensemaking process in organizations:

First, sensemaking occurs when a flow of organizational circumstances is turned into words and salient categories. Second, organizing itself is embodied in written and spoken texts. Third, reading, writing, conversing, and editing are crucial actions that serve as the media through which the invisible hand of institutions shapes conduct.³⁴

To see how this happens, consider the following narrative: “Our church is no longer growing because people are hungry for expository preaching.” This simple story frames reality within a congregation by constructing a plausible cause-and-effect sequence of events. First of all, it rests on the premise that the church is in fact not growing, or more precisely, the church is *no longer* growing, which implies that the church *was* growing at some point in the past. Of course this narrative interpretation could be confirmed or rejected with a simple check of attendance data. But even with solid empirical evidence to the contrary, this story may still be effective due to the ambiguous notion of “growth” – stagnant churches often explain a lack of numerical growth by invoking the metaphor of “spiritual growth” to indicate that church members are deepening their understandings of Scripture in spite of declining attendance. Regardless of how the term “growth”

³³ Karl Weick, *Sensemaking*, 15.

³⁴ Karl Weick, “Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking,” *Organization Science* 16 no.4 (July 2005): 409.

is understood, the work of interpretive framing is readily apparent in the story's premise – it assumes something is wrong, and as a corollary, something needs to be done to fix it. Secondly, the narrative makes the claim that “people are hungry” for a certain style of sermon. Though this sort of conclusion is rarely drawn from empirical community-based survey data, the claim still manages to frame the world in a particular way by flattening the general public into a monolithic “people” who are singularly interested in listening to expository preaching. Moreover, it tacitly blames church leadership for a failure to accommodate these public appetites – perhaps the pastor is too bookish to notice or too stubborn to change, or perhaps the story is simply a nostalgic nod to the church's glory days when scores of young families from the surrounding neighborhood packed the pews every Sunday morning. Whatever the reason, the church's lack of growth is offered as “proof” that a future course of action is needed: namely, the church must offer more expository sermons. Other stories could be used to frame reality just as well to suggest other courses of action. For instance, “Our church may not be growing numerically, but we are growing spiritually,” or “Our church is dying because the neighborhood around us is changing,” or even “We are the faithful remnant – though we are small in number, God has called us to be a witness to this neighborhood.” Each of these stories can significantly alter the congregation's posture towards leadership, the surrounding community, and its own value system. But the important thing to note here is that these attitudes are shaped *before* any decisions are made about programs or policies. The story frames the very way congregations see the world around them, long before any rational decisions are made.

In another example of how storytelling reframes experience, ethnographer Julian Orr documented the way Xerox repairmen talk about the machines they work on.³⁵ Orr wrote that by telling stories about troubleshooting machines, repairmen expanded their interpretive frames to better equip one another to diagnose and repair copy machines. What is notable about Orr's

³⁵ Julian Orr, *Talking About Machines: An Ethnography of a Modern Job* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

argument is that much of what is vital to the success of the repairmen's work falls outside the official communication channels (repair manuals, technical drawings, job descriptions, and so on). Rather it is through stories – gossip, chitchat, and 'war stories' of encounters with particularly difficult machines – that copier repairmen expanded their frames to learn how to do their job more effectively. This is consistent with another study by Karl Weick that suggests that "nonstop talk" and other socially-interactive habits can help organizations maintain stable interpretive frames and meaning systems in the face of a crisis.³⁶

Often this "nonstop talk" generates *antenarrative*, or "fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and pre-narrative speculation, a bet that a proper narrative can be constituted."³⁷ This term was first introduced by David Boje who used the prefix ante- as a play on words. It not only signifies something before or beneath a fully developed narrative – a "proto" story – but it also suggests a "bet" that others will buy into the story ("upping the ante"). Because an antenarrative is a story told in the midst of unfolding events before an interpretive frame has been fully developed, it is susceptible to being rewritten, revised, or jettisoned altogether – the storyteller may lose the bet if another story can better frame (or reframe) organizational reality. Antenarratives frequently "unravel and fragment, merge with other tellings, or disappear when no longer part of anyone's tellings."³⁸ Sometimes though, antenarratives are successfully reified into longer, more stable narratives that constitute the interpretive frame for the organization.

On the other hand, Yiannis Gabriel has argued that much of what passes for a story in Boje's opinion is not actually a story at all. Rather, Boje's notion of antenarrative represents a "narrative deskilling". Gabriel reserves the term narrative for a narrow category of speech acts

³⁶ Karl Weick, "The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster," *ASQ* 38 (1993): 628-652.

³⁷ Boje, *Narrative Methods for Organizational and Communication Research* (London: Sage, 2001), 1.

³⁸ David Boje, "Breaking Out of Narrative's Prison: Improper Story in Storytelling Organizations," *Storytelling, Self, Society*, 2 no. 2 (Spring 2006): 39.

with “simple but resonant plots and characters, involving narrative skill, entailing risk, and aiming to entertain, persuade, and win over.”³⁹ Stories must tap into some “deeper, more powerful, or even transcendental” truth that provokes an emotional response in an audience.⁴⁰ This is accomplished by incorporating various poetic tropes into a story: the attribution of motive, the attribution of causality, the attribution of agency, the attribution of providential significance, and so on. Only a fully-developed narrative told intentionally by a skilled storyteller can fit his definition.

Even though Gabriel quibbles with Boje’s understanding of what qualifies as a story, it is clear that he views the sensemaking capabilities of narrative as robustly as anyone. In fact, Gabriel highlights the inherent power of stories to frame experience on an emotional, precognitive level. The way he describes it, “story work” (a term he uses with explicit psychotherapy connotations) performs a therapeutic function, giving storytellers the tools to name and cope with profound emotional sentiments, whether fear, anger, joy, or confusion. In an organization, reality may seem

irrational, disorderly, puzzling and threatening, our actions lead to unanticipated results, and in spite of our best attempts to control our lives, we constantly face situations that we had not anticipated. ... So, we turn to narrative forms of explanation, interpretation and sensemaking. By attributing motive, agency, or purpose to our human predicament, we may not always make them enjoyable, or even tolerable, but at least we make them sensical, capable of being understood.⁴¹

Thus narrative is a way to grapple with uncertainty, or equivocality, as Weick might say.

But instead of addressing equivocality on a rational, conscious level, stories work beneath the surface of organizational perception. Stories shape the very interpretive framework that organizational members use to make decisions about events and experiences.

³⁹ Yiannis Gabriel, *Storytelling in Organizations: Facts, Fictions and Fantasies* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 22.

⁴⁰ Yiannis Gabriel, *Storytelling in Organizations*, 35.

⁴¹ Yiannis Gabriel, *Storytelling in Organizations*, 239-240.

Stories Align Relationships

Stories shape the social dynamics within organizations by affirming or reconfiguring relationships among members. Dennis Mumby was one of the first scholars to explore this dimension of organizational storytelling. Writing in an era dominated by a rational-world paradigm, Mumby suggested that contemporary approaches to organizational story were theoretically naïve because they failed to account for the “deep structures” that control the social dynamics of organizational life.⁴² Narrative always has a *political function* – a story does not inertly reflect existing social dynamics, but also produces, maintains, and reproduces power structures in organizations. This is because stories tend to be taken as face-value artifacts of organizational life, as “just the way things are”. But Mumby argued that narratives present the world in a particular way according to a parochial set of interests. As such, stories tend to legitimize certain social structures within an organization, while simultaneously delegitimizing alternative social configurations. Moreover, stories are most effective when they are presented in such a way that these alternative configurations are obscured or altogether invisible.

To illustrate his point, Mumby provided a re-reading of a well-known story that had circulated at IBM for some time that depicted a confrontation between infamous CEO Thomas Watson, Jr. and a

twenty-two-year-old bride weighing ninety pounds whose husband had been sent overseas and who, in consequence, had been given a job until his return... The young woman, Lucille Burger, was obliged to make certain that people entering security areas wore the correct clear identification. Surrounded by his usual entourage of white-shirted men, Watson approached the doorway to an area where she was on guard, wearing an orange badge acceptable elsewhere in the plant, but not a green badge, which alone permitted entrance at her door. “I was trembling in my uniform, which was far too big,” she recalled. “It hid my shakes, but not my voice. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said to him. I knew who he was alright. ‘You cannot enter. Your admittance is not recognized.’ That’s what we were supposed to say.” The men accompanying Watson were stricken; the moment held unpredictable

⁴² Dennis Mumby, “The Political Function of Narrative in Organizations,” *CM* 54 (June 1987): 113-127.

possibilities. “Don’t you know who he is?” someone hissed. Watson raised his hand for silence, while one of the party strode off and returned with the appropriate badge.⁴³

Scholars traditionally used this story to deduce core values from IBM corporate culture. For instance, many argued this story demonstrated that nobody, not even the CEO, is exempt from following the rules. For Mumby this reading was too simplistic. First, the fact that this story had become a part of organizational lore suggests the incident was exceptional in some way: “If Watson was subject to corporate rules in the same way as other employees, then this story would have little significance.”⁴⁴ Secondly, this story is significant not because it *reveals* an organizational core value, but because it *obscures* the fact that the name badge protocol was “created by the corporate elite (of which Watson is the head) to protect their own interests... for the benefit of people like Watson, and not for people like Lucille Berger.”⁴⁵ The name badge rules were not “just the way things are” – they were constructed by IBM corporate elite to protect proprietary company information, maintain market share, and ultimately maximize profits. But this fact is obscured because it cast Lucille as the hero of the story. Even though she felt intense pressure to bend the rules, Lucille stood her ground and insisted Watson follow company protocol. According to the story’s internal logic, she had confronted the CEO and won. But as Mumby argues, Lucille was not really the winner after all since she merely enforced rules that Watson himself put in place. Watson ultimately won because Lucille acted in a way to protect *his* interests. Moreover, because the story presented Lucille as a hero, others in the company were compelled to imitate her actions, which of course only further reinforced Watson’s interests. That is, the story reproduced the deep power structures in the organization by encouraging other IBM employees to act in a way that protected the company.

⁴³ Originally printed in William Rogers, *Think* (New York: Stein & Day, 1969), 153-154. Reprinted in Mumby, “Political Function,” 121.

⁴⁴ Mumby, “Political Function,” 122.

⁴⁵ Mumby, “Political Function,” 121.

Extending Mumby's argument, linguist Teun van Dijk has written extensively about how racism is reproduced through stories. He notes that stories are often told within broader argumentative strategies in racist discourse. Merely making a racist statement typically doesn't resonate with others. But when a racist statement is coupled with a story as evidence, the speaker is much more likely to be persuasive, or seen as 'just reporting the facts'. Van Dijk found that there is "a systematic difference between stories told by prejudiced people and by those who favor equality and actively oppose racism."⁴⁶ Not surprisingly, the former group tended to tell stories that were negative, while the latter group told stories that regarded different races in a positive light – and even tended to tell negative stories about other people of their own race who themselves were prejudiced. Such stories are not mere expressions of personal opinion, however. Storytelling in these cases is a function of the larger racial group where "personal experiences with the 'other' are interpreted as experiences of the [whole] group [and] as anonymous stories of group experiences, expressing group concerns, and group beliefs."⁴⁷ This has the effect of reifying group boundaries and strengthening internal cohesion by clearly demarcating the difference between in-group and out-group members.

Storytelling has similarly been shown to be an integral part of a "multileveled strategic process" of social control within families. Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson argue that stories "generate and reproduce the family by legitimating power relations that privilege, for example, parents over children, males over females, and the white, middle-class family over alternative family structures."⁴⁸ Family members in more powerful positions likely have certain storytelling rights that give them more control over the family's collective memory. Stories are also used to

⁴⁶ Teun van Dijk, "Stories and Racism," in *Narrative and Social Control: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Dennis Mumby (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993), 140.

⁴⁷ Van Dijk, "Stories and Racism," 140-141.

⁴⁸ Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson, "Family Storytelling as a Strategy of Social Control," in *Narrative and Social Control: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Dennis Mumby (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993), 50.

construct tribal and family identity – ‘what it means to be so-and-so’ – by presenting the family as exceptional in some way. Stories about ancestors or physical traits (e.g. ‘our blood’) “naturalize the present” by linking contemporary audiences to an immutable past and steering the family into an inevitable future. Stories also establish family norms and rules – both the ground rules of family life as well as the ‘underground rules’ that discourage behaviors like alcoholism and abuse that threaten the survival of the family.

The effect of storytelling on social relationships is even more apparent when examining the mechanics of real-life storytelling interactions. In one of his earliest articles, David Boje observed that scholars incorrectly assumed stories always unfold linearly, are told in their entirety by one speaker, and circulate as singular, stable texts. Boje disagreed, noting that stories are rarely told from beginning to end by a single speaker. On the contrary, they are told in “bits and pieces” with multiple starts and stops, and the hearers are left to “fill in the blanks based on his or her knowledge of the story behind the verbalized story.”⁴⁹ Stories are *performed* or told in a way that invites others to participate, either by silently remembering certain elements, or by loudly interjecting forgotten details. As Boje further explains:

For example, in everyday conversation, we make discursive references to stories as texts in such phrases as “You know the part of his story, don’t you?”; “That’s my story too”; “You need to get the story straight”; “To make a long story short...”; or “I won’t bore you with the whole story; You know it!” These phrases are part of a language we use to signal the parts of the performance that will be shared, as we co-produce and manage the story performances, the parts of the story that will be filled in by our listeners’ imaginations.... Only in the rare instance in which the storyteller is faced with a researcher or a new applicant is he or she likely to tell the whole story, since much of the detail of the story cannot be safely assumed to be recreatable in the novice’s imagination.⁵⁰

Boje calls this *terse storytelling*, or “an abbreviated and succinct simplification of the story in which parts of the plot, some of the characters, and segments of the sequence of events are left to

⁴⁹ David Boje, “The Storytelling Organization: A Study of Story Performance in an Office-Supply Firm,” *ASQ* 36, no. 1 (March 1991): 114.

⁵⁰ David Boje, “Office Supply Firm,” 110.

the hearer's imagination."⁵¹ Most storytelling performances include at least some terse elements. Sometimes a storyteller glosses over details or under-states actions for dramatic effect. For instance, a story about a manager's termination could be rendered more titillating by euphemistically glossing over his or her alleged improprieties. Other times, stories are told tersely because the storyteller assumes that others already know the story. "You know the story!" may in fact be a complete story performance that invites hearers to reconstruct the entire plot silently in their own minds. Regardless of the motive, however, a terse story can dramatically impact social life. Whenever a storyteller leaves key details to be filled in by the hearer's imagination, she runs the risk that some may not know every detail of the story, while others may not know the story at all. "You know the story" then becomes a tacit acknowledgement of a boundary between insiders and outsiders, between those who *know* the story, and those who do not. In fact, telling a terse story legitimizes the status quo and reproduces the social structure within the organization. Much like referencing a shared secret among friends, a terse story can reinforce bonds between insiders (who know the story), while simultaneously ensuring that newcomers remain on the outside looking in.

Though stories certainly impact the shape of social configurations within organizations, social configurations likewise have an impact on *which* stories are told. In every organization there are myriads of voices telling stories, all with unique biases, agendas, and goals. In some organizations, senior leadership tightly controls the storytelling activity by silencing rival stories and "collapsing everything to one 'grand narrative' or 'grand story'".⁵² Consider the Disney Corporation, for instance. David Boje spent years collecting stories from Disney, both 'official' versions published by the company, as well as *in situ* stories told by staff, executives, and stockholders. Contrary to the popular portrayals of Walt Disney as a "nice guy" whose warmth

⁵¹ David Boje, "Office Supply Firm," 116.

⁵² David Boje, "Tamara-Land," 1000.

and vision energized the creative process, Boje found numerous alternative accounts that portrayed the company founder as a moody, domineering tyrant who instilled fear in his employees and kept artists from having creative input or signing their work. By and large, however, this alternative storyline has garnered relatively little attention from the general public – surely an indication of how tightly Disney executives have controlled the corporate storytelling process since the founder’s death.

Nike executives, on the other hand, have had only mixed success in controlling which organizational stories get told. Over the past few decades the company has faced repeated accusations from human rights activists that their labor practices exploit sweatshop workers in developing countries. When accusations first surfaced in the 1990s, Nike responded with an anti-propaganda campaign that backfired terribly. But with the help of a talented public relations staff, Nike eventually learned how to take control of the storytelling process by funding their own watchdog groups to intercept damaging reports before other activist groups could exploit them. Furthermore, Nike has striven to present itself as an organization that polices its own factories and contractors, as “a protector of the impoverished Third World female worker.”⁵³ Today in fact, Nike “skillfully stories itself as a champion of women and minorities with recycled inner-city slogans like ‘Just do it’ and images of successful minority athletes.”⁵⁴

In some cases, organizational stories are coopted and used as tools for bald social control. For instance, Faye Smith and Joann Keyton trace a public disagreement between writer/producer Linda Bloodworth-Thomason and actress Delta Burke, then co-star of the television series

⁵³ David Boje, “Narrative’s Prison,” 37

⁵⁴ David Boje, “Narrative’s Prison,” 36. Boje has written extensively about Nike’s storytelling ability. See especially David Boje, “Nike, Greek Goddess of Victory or Cruelty? Women’s Stories of Asian Factory Life,” *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 11, no. 8 (1999): 461-480; “Is Nike Roadrunner or Wile E. Coyote? A Postmodern Organization Analysis of Double Logic,” *Journal of Business & Entrepreneurship* 2 (1999): 77-109; “Nike Corporate Writing of Academic, Business and Cultural Practices,” *Management Communication Quarterly* 13 no. 6 (2000): 558-566; and David Boje and N. E. Landrum, “Nike Is Just In Time” (paper presented at the All Academy Showcase Session of the Academy of Management Meetings, Toronto, Canada, August, 2000).

Designing Women.⁵⁵ While the two were embroiled in a series of bitter disputes behind the scenes, Bloodworth-Thomason used the show's script to display her frustration with the actress on screen. This culminated in the infamous mud bath scene from the "La Place Sans Souci" episode where Burke and her co-stars engaged in a physical altercation in a health club mud bath. This situation was conspicuously out of character for the show, as Burke and her costars up to that point had been depicted in supportive, non-competitive relationships with one another. Smith and Keyton suggest that the mud bath episode became the intersection of two key storylines – the onscreen, scripted storyline seen by millions of television viewers, and the semi-private storyline between Burke and Bloodworth-Thomason. It also represented an intersection of Bloodworth-Thomason's narrative power and her social power. Since she occupied a powerful social position within the production company, she was able to effectively control both storylines, while the actors – Burke included – were contractually obligated to play along.

Not every organization is controlled by a single story crafted by organizational elites. Some organizations willingly embrace their inherent "plurality of stories, voices and realities as well as a multiplicity of ways to interpret stories" because they recognize their potential to generate new organizational possibilities.⁵⁶ In some cases, stories can even provide creative resources, or a "means of enablement, [a] vehicle through which social actors can radically transform the way they conceive of a particular social structure."⁵⁷ That is, organizational stories have the potential to effect deep social change by driving a wedge between a dominant ideology and lived experience. Stories are safe places to demonstrate alternative ways of construing reality or configuring social space – they can be a revolutionary tool that opens new possibilities for life in the organization and in the world. This power for social change through story is more accessible

⁵⁵ Faye Smith and Joann Keyton, "Organizational Storytelling: Metaphors for Relational Power and Identity Struggles," *Management Communication Quarterly* 15 no. 2 (November 2001): 149-182.

⁵⁶ David Boje, "Tamara-Land," 998.

⁵⁷ Mumby, "Political Function," 124.

than ever as media and Internet technology become more commonplace. One need only look to the “swift boat” controversy during the 2004 United States presidential election for an example of how stories can have profound political implications.⁵⁸ Or in another example, a Twitter account in Australia attempts to combat racism and promote public health concerns by sharing weekly micro-stories composed by persons of Aboriginal descent.⁵⁹

Ultimately, though, social change is rarely a linear result of a story because entrenched power structures are slow to capitulate to simple narrative pressure. In fact, stories usually gain their power only as they circulate in an organization and are repeated by various organizational members, detached from their original storytelling contexts. Stories take on a life of their own and often generate unexpected results. While scholars turn to far-flung disciplines like quantum physics and complexity theory to understand precisely how stories interact with other forces within postmodern social spaces, it can be said that deep social change is at least partially reflexive: the organization itself is changed by the stories organizational members tell.⁶⁰ Or to put it another way, organizational identity is refined by storytelling.

Stories Refine Personal and Organizational Identities

Stories are the primary tools for both individual and organizational identity construction. A key theoretical foundation for this section is *narrative therapy*, which is rooted in the assumption that human beings, whether consciously or not, live inside a story they write about their lives:

⁵⁸ George Dionisopoulos, “Incident on the Bay Hap River and the Guns of August: The ‘Swift Boat Drama’ and Counter-Narrative in the 2004 Election,” *Communication Quarterly* 57 no. 4 (Oct 2009): 487-511.

⁵⁹ Melissa Sweet, Luke Pearson and Pat Dudgeon, “@InDIgenouSX: A Case Study of Community-led Innovation in Digital Media,” *Media International Australia* 149 (November 2013): 104-111.

⁶⁰ See Stephanie Dailey and Larry Browning, “Retelling Stories in Organizations: Understanding the Functions of Narrative Repetition,” *Academy of Management Review* 39 no. 1 (2014): 22-43 and David Boje, *Storytelling Organizational Practices: Managing in the Quantum Age* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them. Specific experiences of events of the past and present, and those that are predicted to occur in the future, must be connected in a lineal sequence to develop this account. This account can be referred to as a story... The success of this storying of experience provides persons with a sense of continuity and meaning in their lives...⁶¹

For most people, this “sense of continuity and meaning” naturally becomes an anchor for personal identity because it provides a stable interpretive grid for understanding one’s place in the world. But with stability comes risk – stories can become fossilized and trap individuals in self-destructive habits and patterns of thought (narrative therapy calls these *problem-saturated stories*). Thankfully, problem-saturated stories are not static reflections of an inflexible reality. In fact, narrative therapy teaches that “persons are rich in lived experience... [yet] only a fraction of this experience can be storied and expressed at any one time, [and] a great deal of lived experience inevitably falls outside the dominant stories”.⁶² By uncovering unstoried experiences, or *unique outcomes*, individuals can discover new touchstone moments that can be plotted into new storylines.

But how do these new storylines impact identity construction? Jerome Bruner writes that humans are drawn to interact reflexively with narrative by imitating characters, plots, and motifs presented in stories: “mimesis between life so-called and narrative is a two-way affair”.⁶³ Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps go even further, arguing that narrative and the notion of the self are intertwined in a mutually dependent relationship. Since a story originates from a particular point of view and can only present experience from that one unique perspective, it is impossible to grasp the totality of either the experience or the narrator. Rather, “every telling provides narrators and

⁶¹ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1990), 10.

⁶² White and Epston, *Narrative Means*, 15.

⁶³ Jerome Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” *Social Research* 71 no. 3 (Fall 2004): 692. Originally published in *Social Research* 54 no. 1 (Spring 1987).

listeners/readers with an opportunity for fragmented self-understanding.”⁶⁴ To tell a story, then, implies a choice about which ‘self’ to enact at any given moment:

Spinning out their tellings through choices of words, degree of elaboration, attribution of causality and sequentiality, and the foregrounding and backgrounding of emotions, circumstances, and behavior, narrators build novel understandings of themselves-in-the-world. In this manner, selves evolve in the time frame of a single telling as well as in the course of the many tellings that eventually compose a life.⁶⁵

Contrary to the popular construal of the self as stable and unified across a lifespan, the self is actually made up of multiple fragmented selves strung together in temporal sequence. Narrative is the glue or the bridge that connects the self that acted in the past, the self that acts in the present moment, and the projected self that will act in the future. Each story along the way, then, represents a choice about precisely how the self gets put together. In a real sense, “we actualize our selves through the activity of narrating” because a story is an opportunity to foreground, background, emphasize, or omit certain features of our identity.⁶⁶

This happens in many ways. For instance, one team of researchers explored how online photo-sharing sites (such as Flickr and Instagram) pose both opportunities and challenges for queer activists.⁶⁷ The process of collecting, curating, and displaying photos has always been a narrative activity that corresponds with one’s construction of identity. For example, family photo albums and summer vacation slideshows narratively recount “who we are” by documenting the growth of children and providing opportunities to relive meaningful experiences with loved ones. But now that Flickr, Instagram, and other sites provide a public platform for sharing photos, queer users must balance the desire to advocate for a more open society with the need to withhold

⁶⁴ Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, “Narrating the Self,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25 (October 1996): 21.

⁶⁵ Ochs and Capps, “Narrating the Self,” 22-23.

⁶⁶ Ochs and Capps, “Narrating the Self,” 29.

⁶⁷ Sonja Vivienne and Jean Burgess, “The remediation of the personal photograph and the politics of self-representation in digital storytelling,” *Journal of Material Culture* 18 no.3 (September 2013): 279-298.

certain parts of their identity out of fear that “coming out” will put them or their families at risk. Each photo adds a chapter in a story, but each photo is also a high-stakes choice about which self to present to the world.

Stories about conversions provide another opportunity to see identity construction at work. When someone tells a story about a personal spiritual awakening, they construct two selves via narrative – a former self and a newly enlightened self who has overcome the former self. Often when a convert tells her story, she depicts her former self as patently ignorant, unenlightened, or even sinful. Alternatively, her new self is stylized as a new person, fully awake and finally enlightened. Stories help “undermine their past selves in order to denounce a version of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’” that was once central to his or her identity.⁶⁸ Major life events are reinterpreted in light of her conversion and replotted into a new life story. Peter Stromberg goes even farther, arguing that a conversion story is a ritual in and of itself that has the power to “evoke, and in a literal sense even reconstitute” the conversion experience all over again.⁶⁹

Of course, narrative identity construction is not purely personal work – it involves the creation and maintenance of a likeminded community:

As awakeners symbolically overcome their past self, they establish a unique epistemic, cognitive, and moral footing—a socially founded right to be self-assured about their present system of beliefs because they have “seen the darkness” and can therefore testify to the “false” nature of the rejected worldview. Communities, in turn, use and display awakening accounts to establish and defend their cognitive authority in the face of competition. In all these cases, awakening stories serve to validate the shared sentiments, beliefs, memories, ideologies, and objectives of a group, whether an established institution, a social movement organization, or a more loosely defined thought collective. They provide autobiographical models that potential believers can use to “see the light” and migrate to a particular community’s collective worldview.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Thomas DeGloma, “Awakenings, Autobiography, Memory, and the Social Logic of Personal Discovery,” *Sociological Forum* 25 no. 3 (September 2010): 533. See also Bailey Gillespie, *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1979).

⁶⁹ Peter Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 118.

⁷⁰ DeGloma, “Awakenings,” 534.

So narrative is a key link between personal identity construction and communal or organizational identity construction. It is an act of “collective centering” that uses the experiences of an individual to affirm and underscore a set of values shared by a community.⁷¹ Storytelling is “the work that keeps us US, whoever WE may be”.⁷²

The restorying of an individual leader’s identity can likewise have dramatic consequences for the entire organization – ironically because the construction of a leader’s identity is often a process somewhat removed from the actual flesh-and-blood leader. In fact, Boas Shamir and colleagues urge leaders to compose a “life-story that feels comfortable to themselves and can be presented to others”, because organizational members may encounter the life-story long before meeting the actual person.⁷³ Tommi Auvinen similarly invokes the metaphor of a *ghost leader* to explain how stories make a leader dynamically present in an organization – like a ghost – even though she may be physically absent.⁷⁴ Often these narrative constructions become active agents within their organizations. David Boje and Carl Rhodes describe the *Virtual Leader Construct* (VLC), or “a non-human image of a leader who is purposefully created” through story to be a leader within the organization.⁷⁵ Three degrees of VLCs can be observed in the fast food industry:

- 1) an imitation of a former flesh-and-blood leader (such as Dave Thomas, founder of Wendy’s);
- 2) a loose caricature of a former leader (a cartoon version of Colonel Sanders, founder of KFC); and

⁷¹ Mary Boyce, “Collective Centering and Collective Sense-Making in the Stories and Storytelling of One Organization,” *Organization Studies* 16 no. 1 (1995): 107-137.

⁷² Charlotte Linde, *Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 224.

⁷³ Boas Shamir, Hava Dayan-Horesh and Dalya Adler, “Leading By Biography: Towards a Life-story Approach to the Study of Leadership,” *Leadership* 1 no. 1 (2005): 15.

⁷⁴ Tommi Auvinen, “The Ghost Leader: An Empirical Study on Narrative Leadership,” *Electronic Journal of Business Ethics and Organizational Studies* 17 no. 1 (2012): 4. See also Teppo Sintonen and Tommi Auvinen, “Who Is Leading, Leader or Story?” *Tamara Journal* 8 no. 2 (2009): 95-109.

⁷⁵ David Boje and Carl Rhodes, “The Virtual Leader Construct: The Mass Mediatization and Simulation of Transformational Leadership,” *Leadership* 2005 no. 1 (2005): 407-428.

- 3) a completely fabricated leader with no direct relation to any actual flesh-and-blood leader (such as Ronald McDonald, created by McDonalds).

As discursive entities created by their respective organizations, VLCs take on leadership roles in ways comparable to human leaders. Ronald McDonald for instance has held executive positions with the McDonalds Corporation. In the 2003 annual report he was listed as Chief Happiness Officer alongside other (human) executives, and in 2004 he earned the additional title of Ambassador for an Active Lifestyle. VLCs are so “real” they can even lead organizations through crisis. Following the unexpected death of CEO Jim Cantalupo in 2004, Ronald McDonald appeared in newspaper ads around the world with a single tear running down his face and a caption that read, “We miss you Jim”. Remarkably, no other executive – not even Cantalupo’s successor – ever took on the role of publicly expressing grief over Cantalupo’s death. Ronald alone “had the charismatic influence to appeal to people around the world, and to meet the strategic goal of sustaining corporate image cohesion in a time of crisis.”⁷⁶

Sometimes “constructed” identities seem blatantly disingenuous, such as when celebrities use Twitter to narratively construct a “backstage” identity in order to build a (false) sense of intimacy with fans,⁷⁷ or when Wal-Mart executives commandeer stories about ‘the spirit of Mr. Sam’ (the company founder, Sam Walton) to advance a ruthless corporate agenda.⁷⁸ In one well-known instance, the Lonelygirl15 hoax caused many within the community of YouTube users to reconsider the notions of identity and authenticity. Lonelygirl15 was the screen name of Bree, purportedly a quirky teenager posting her personal video blog on YouTube in 2006. After quickly

⁷⁶ David Boje, “Narrative’s Prison,” 43. See also David Boje’s article that compares and contrasts the public identity construction processes of Bill Gates and Richard Branson. See David Boje and Robert Smith, “Re-storying and Visualizing the Changing Entrepreneurial Identities of Bill Gates and Richard Branson,” *Culture and Organization* 16 no. 4 (December 2010): 307-331.

⁷⁷ Alice Marwick and danah boyd, “To See and Be Seen: Celebrity Practice on Twitter,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media* 17 no. 2 (2011): 139-158.

⁷⁸ David Boje and Grace Anne Rosile, “Specters of Wal-Mart: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Stories of Sam Walton’s Ghost,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 5 no.2 (May 2008).

garnering a worldwide following it was revealed that Bree was actually an actress hired by an advertising agency to create a viral marketing campaign. Outrage ensued and many members of the YouTube community felt betrayed – up to that point, the constructed nature of online identity had gone largely unquestioned. Users took for granted that the forum was fundamentally participatory and democratic, where individuals could connect with one another beyond the reach of commercial influences. The expectation among users was that the platform gave them unfiltered, authentic access to each other’s “real” life because YouTube videos were supposed to be raw and honest, a window to someone’s true self. But the discovery that Lonelygirl15 was a marketing hoax gave rise to a “distrust of constructedness as representative of commercialization” and forced the community to grapple with questions of identity on a personal and a communal level.⁷⁹ For instance, the community had to reconsider the notion of authenticity, which had “been supplanted by the equation of authenticity with emotional resonance or credibility, as assessed by the narrator’s audience.”⁸⁰ Being authentic or “real” for the community was no longer a question of ontology because the inherent “constructedness” of each other’s identity could no longer be ignored.

In the end, VLCs, ghost leaders and other “inauthentic” constructed identities mustn’t be dismissed merely because they are constructed through narrative. Though some forms seem disingenuous, such “inauthentic” modes of storytelling may be just as impactful on day-to-day organizational life as any flesh-and-blood leader because they shape the way identity is understood.

⁷⁹ Ruth Page, *Stories and Social Media* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 173.

⁸⁰ Page, *Stories*, 184.

Stories Assign Symbolic Meanings Within Organizational Culture

Stories shape organizational culture by assigning and reassigning meanings for organizational members. Often this happens when stories depict shared symbols and practices. In one study, for instance, Stephanie Coopman and colleagues examined transcripts from churches in Southern Appalachian and determined that leaders in those congregations wove together biblical and non-biblical story material to, among other things, manage meaning and reduce uncertainty for members.⁸¹ In other studies, Andrew Singleton explored how stories about the devil and miraculous faith healings “assigned, ordered and fashioned” socially-constructed meanings within Christian communities and even helped demonstrate certain practices like prayer.⁸² And Shauntae Brown White showed how United Methodist pastor and former Kansas City mayor Emmanuel Cleaver masterfully used storytelling to bring clarity to complex and controversial moral dilemmas by drawing on a wealth of cultural and Biblical tradition to sustain his rhetoric, even in the public sphere.⁸³

But the most compelling use of storytelling as a way to communicate values and model behaviors for organizational members comes from the field of narrative leadership. As a cognate of organizational storytelling, the field of narrative leadership has taken off in recent years and is today inundated with how-to trade books that describe how to lead organizations by telling stories. Among the earliest of these titles was David Armstrong’s *Managing by Storying Around*, which

⁸¹ Stephanie Coopman, Joy Hart, James Hougland and Dwight Billings, “Speaking for God: The Functions of Church Leader Storytelling in Southern Appalachia in the 1950s,” *American Communication Journal* 1, no. 2 (February 1998):1-18, accessed July 7, 2014, <http://ac-journal.org/journal/vol1/Iss2/articles/zimm/zimm.htm>.

⁸² Andrew Singleton, “No Sympathy for the Devil: Narratives about Evil,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 16, no. 2 (2001): 177-191 and “‘Your Faith has Made You Well’: The Role of Storytelling in the Experience of Miraculous Healing,” *Review of Religious Research*, 43, no. 2 (2001): 121-138. Quote taken from “No Sympathy for the Devil”, 189. Brown’s case study is fascinating because it highlights the leadership qualities of stories in tandem with the leadership capabilities of a flesh-and-blood leader.

⁸³ Shauntae Brown White, “Telling the Story: Kansas City Mayor and United Methodist Pastor Emmanuel Cleaver’s Use of Storytelling to Transcend Rhetorical Barriers,” *Journal of African American Studies* 9 no. 4 (Spring 2006): 32-44.

attempts to bring to the business community the storytelling principles he gleaned from his pastor's sermons.⁸⁴ Armstrong's book was quickly followed by similar titles, such as Evelyn Clark's *Around the Corporate Campfire: How Great Leaders Use Stories to Inspire Success*, Peg Neuhauser's *Corporate Legends & Lore: The Power of Storytelling as a Management Tool*, Craig Wortmann's *What's Your Story: Using Stories to Ignite Performance and Be More Successful*, and Annette Simmons' *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins: How to Use Your Own Stories to Communicate with Power and Impact*. Most of these titles offered slightly remixed frameworks for determining when and how to use a particular story to communicate certain meanings to listeners. Paul Smith's *Lead With a Story*, for instance, identifies five core objectives for telling stories and even provides an appendix to help readers to find precisely the right story to meet any leadership challenge.⁸⁵

Arguably the most popular writer in the field of narrative leadership over the past twenty years has been Stephen Denning. While working for the World Bank in the 1990s, Denning tried to convince top executives to make major structural changes within the organization. But when he found that his traditional presentation methods failed to persuade his audiences, he developed the idea of a *springboard story*, or "a story that enables a leap in understanding by the audience so as to grasp how an organization or community or complex system may change."⁸⁶ So he began telling this simple story:

In June 1995, a health worker in a tiny town in Zambia logged on to the website for the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia and got the answer to a question on how to treat malaria. Now this was June 1995, not June 2015. This was not the capital of Zambia but a tiny place six hundred kilometers away. And this was not rich country: this was Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the world. But the most important part of this picture for us in the World Bank is this: the World Bank isn't in the picture. We don't have our know-how organized in such a way that we could share our

⁸⁴ Published in 1992 by Doubleday Currency.

⁸⁵ Published in 2012 by AMACOM.

⁸⁶ Stephen Denning, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Actions in Knowledge-Era Organizations* (Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2001): xviii.

knowledge with the millions of people in the world who make decisions about poverty. But just imagine if we did.⁸⁷

This story quickly captured the imaginations of key decision-makers at the World Bank, and in a year or so, the organization had officially adopted his proposals. Denning writes that the key to his success was engaging “the little voice” inside each audience member’s head, the voice usually treated like a distraction. “Tell a story in a way that elicits a second story from the little voice in the head,” he writes, adding that when this is done successfully, it leads the listener to imagine his or her own next steps. “And because the listeners have created the idea, they like it.”⁸⁸ Denning warns, however, there are rules for choosing springboard stories. For instance, stories should always have a happy ending, they should always be true, and they should be told in a minimalist fashion so listeners don’t get distracted by the details. Denning’s subsequent books, *The Leader’s Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative* and *The Secret Language of Leadership: How Leaders Inspire Action Through Narrative* expanded on these themes and have each become enormously popular bestsellers.

Although Denning and other narrative leadership authors continue to churn out new books, most fail to meet standards of academic rigor.⁸⁹ There are exceptions, however. David Barry and Michael Elmes for instance have published an influential article that describes strategic planning and leadership as a form of narrative.⁹⁰ Organizational strategy is a form of fiction, they argued, but not in the sense that it is deceptive or false. Rather strategy is something that is

⁸⁷ This story has been published in multiple places and in various forms. The version cited here is from Stephen Denning, “Using Narrative as a Tool for Change,” in *Storytelling in Organizations: Why Storytelling is Transforming 21st Century Organizations and Management*, ed. John Seeley Brown et al. (Burlington, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005), 104.

⁸⁸ Stephen Denning, “Using Narrative,” 115.

⁸⁹ David Boje recently surveyed the extant literature in the narrative leadership field and developed a helpful typology. See his “Pitfalls in Storytelling Advice and Praxis,” review of *The Springboard* by Stephen Denning, *Academy of Management Review* 31 no. 1 (2008): 218-230.

⁹⁰ David Barry and Michael Elmes, “Strategy Retold: Toward a Narrative View of Strategic Discourse,” *Academy of Management Review* 22 no.1 (1997): 429-452.

authored or created, and as such, strategists face the same challenges as other writers of fiction: “how to develop an engaging, compelling account, one that readers can willingly buy into and implement.”⁹¹ A compelling strategic narrative must achieve two fundamental outcomes: *credibility* (or believability) and *defamiliarization* (or novelty). To achieve credibility, strategists must “disguise the inherent fictionality of their stories” by enhancing materiality of their narratives through verbose language, concrete metaphors, and multimedia presentation tools.⁹² Credibility is also achieved by appropriating literary devices such as voice, perspective, ordering, plot, and paying attention to the interplay between text, author, and reader. Defamiliarization however stands in dialectical tension with credibility – that which is credible quickly becomes mundane, while the patently unfamiliar is rarely seen as trustworthy. Thus Barry and Elmes argue that organizational strategists must balance ideas that emphasize “diverse points of view” and be “more concerned with surfacing, legitimizing and juxtaposing differing organizational stories.”

Another exception is William Kirkwood, for whom storytelling is a powerful rhetorical tool that can lead listeners to consider new alternatives to solving problems. Kirkwood took issue with an idea suggested by Walter Fisher, that people are drawn to stories based on the criteria of *narrative fidelity* (whether or not a particular story resonates with what they already believe to be true). “It implies that ‘good stories’ cannot and perhaps should not exceed people’s values and beliefs, whether or not these are admirable or accurate.”⁹³ While classical rhetoric has been used for centuries to express and apply shared values of communities, Kirkwood notes that an equally important goal is to introduce new creative possibilities that might not otherwise be imagined. Narrative is especially well suited to enhance rhetorical strategy because it can present new values, solutions, and possibilities in nonthreatening ways. Thus narrative has a moral dimension: “When

⁹¹ Barry and Elmes, “Strategy Retold,” 433.

⁹² Barry and Elmes, “Strategy Retold,” 434.

⁹³ William Kirkwood, “Narrative and the Rhetoric of Possibility,” *CM* 59 (March 1992): 30.

communication succeeds in opening the mind to creative possibilities, people must choose whether they will try to make such possibilities realities.”⁹⁴

Mark McConkie and Wayne Boss make a similar note about managing change in an organization. Whereas the ‘formal structure’ of an organization is made up of policy, rules, goals, job descriptions, and so forth, story plays a large role in moving the ‘informal structure’, where emotions and feelings are “locked deep in the bowels” of the organization. When coupled with other formal tactics, McConkie and Boss argue that story can be helpful for “influencing – even moving – the informal organization structure” when implementing change efforts.⁹⁵ This is particularly important when organizations face increasingly complex ethical quagmires. Ethicists William Wines and J. Brooke Hamilton suggest that a key factor in helping businesses create an atmosphere of ethical behavior is maintain an understanding of corporate mythology, or “the set of interlocking stories, rituals, rites and customs that inform and give the pivotal sense of meaning and direction to a community or culture.”⁹⁶ The authors focus particularly on how stories shape values for organizational members, and offer four suggestions for developing stories that empower employees to “resist individual and organizational pressures to act unethically and illegally”: 1) choose stories that are compatible with larger regional and/or national mythology; 2) choose stories that can be connected with some aspect of the organization’s history; 3) choose stories that demonstrate commendable reactions to familiar ethical challenges, and 4) choose stories that have impact or emotional power.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ William Kirkwood, “Rhetoric,” 44.

⁹⁵ Mark McConkie and R. Wayne Boss, “Organizational Stories: One Means of Moving the Informal Organization During Change Efforts,” *Public Administration Quarterly* 10 no. 2 (Summer 1986): 189-205.

⁹⁶ William Wines and J. B. Hamilton, “On Changing Organizational Cultures by Injecting New Ideologies: The Power of Stories,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 89 (2009): 440.

⁹⁷ Wines and Hamilton, “Injecting New Ideologies,” 443-4.

This final point is often the most challenging when choosing stories, but John O’Neill’s “Organizational Storytelling Typology” offers helpful criteria.⁹⁸ He identified two scales: *color*, which refers to a story’s aesthetic qualities (such as lyricism, vividness of detail, heroic/comedic/romantic elements, plot development, etc.); and *need fulfillment* (i.e. how well a story reduces stress or anxiety). Plotting these two scales together produces four quadrants which represent four story types: 1) Descriptive Story (low color and low need fulfillment); 2) Anecdotal Story (high color and low need fulfillment); 3) Script Story (low color and high need fulfillment); and 4) Epic Story (high color and high need fulfillment). O’Neill theorizes that Epic Stories are most memorable and enduring in an organization because they are most interesting and best able to meet the needs of organizational members. Furthermore, “when its message is consistent with the organization’s strategic goals, the epic story is in concert with and aids the organization’s processes of strategy implementation due to the enduring nature of the epic.”⁹⁹ David Kopp and colleagues suggest that epic stories are particularly useful when facing an organizational crisis. For instance, Proctor & Gamble survived the Great Depression of the 1920s and 30s by pouring thousands of dollars into its marketing department to fund daily radio “dramatic stories” to appeal to homemakers. These dramatic stories of course became known as “soap operas” and, for many, epitomize O’Neill’s definition of Epic Story.¹⁰⁰

There is also a great deal of literature discussing narrative leadership in the local church – much of it written by and for pastors interested in effecting congregational change through story. Unlike most trade books, church-oriented narrative leadership literature focuses less on specific stories intended to yield particular outcomes than on demonstrating how to “do story work” by

⁹⁸ John O’Neill, “The Role of Storytelling in Affecting Organizational Reality in the Strategic Management Process,” *Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management* 4 no.1 (Summer/Fall 2002): 3-15.

⁹⁹ John O’Neill, “Role of Storytelling,” 14.

¹⁰⁰ David Kopp et al, “Relaax, I Remember the Recession in the Early 1980s...”: Organizational Storytelling as a Crisis Management Tool,” *Human Resource Development Quarterly* 22 no. 3 (Fall 2011): 373-385.

learning from and engaging with stories told by others.¹⁰¹ Kathryn Vitalis Hoffman calls this *story brokering*:

A story broker pays attention to what is happening, evokes the stories of what is happening, listens carefully to what and how the story is told, gathers and interlaces these stories with the biblical story, discerns a preferred, emerging story, and tells that preferred story. To be a story broker, the student is asked not only to tell the stories but also to broker the stories that he or she hears and experiences. The task is not only to lift up the stories but also to negotiate how these stories find expression.¹⁰²

Richard Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones similarly encourage pastors to take a posture of ‘not knowing’ in order to listen, question, examine, and interrogate reality in order to learn from the stories of others.¹⁰³

By far, the most comprehensive work on narrative leadership in local church contexts in recent years is a series of books published by the Alban Institute, edited by Larry Golemon.¹⁰⁴

According to Golemon, four principles guide narrative leadership in ministry:

- 1) Redemptive stories of faith place human meaning within the scope of divine time in order to form persons, communities, and their narrative values.
- 2) Narrative leaders in ministry use personal and symbolic intelligence to draw their congregation into story retrieval, construction, and response that are collaborative and intentional.
- 3) The choice of genre or redemptive motifs for a given story clarifies how the details of character and plot relate to a broader purpose for a faith community and what options of response are available to it.
- 4) Reconstructive narratives appeal to canonical understandings of tradition and practice, but they invite the canon’s disruption and renegotiation as a sign of the tradition’s vitality.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ See Lawrence Peers, “Expeditions into What Is Possible,” in *Finding Our Story*, ed. Larry Golemon (Herndon, VA: AI, 2010), 41-58. The model suggested in this essay is intriguing, but it is ultimately impractical in large, multi-site churches.

¹⁰² Kathryn Vitalis Hoffman, “Shared Narrative: Story Brokering as an Approach to Contextual Learning at Seminary,” in *Teaching Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Pastoral Formation*, ed. Larry Golemon (Herndon, VA: AI, 2010), 90.

¹⁰³ Richard Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones, *Know Your Story and Lead with It: The Power of Narrative in Clergy Leadership* (Herndon, VA: AI, 2009).

¹⁰⁴ Titles in the series include *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change*; *Living Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Culture*; and *Teaching Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Pastoral Formation*.

¹⁰⁵ Larry Golemon, “Toward a Framework for Narrative Leadership in Ministry,” in *Teaching Our Story*, ed. Larry Golemon (Herndon, VA: AI, 2010), 16-20.

A notable theme throughout the series focuses on how meaning is negotiated through story. Biblical stories provide a wealth of material, but non-biblical stories also are capable of (re)assigning meanings to the community's practices.¹⁰⁶ For instance, an essay by Gil Rendle cautions against *safe* and *weak* stories. Safe stories are incomplete stories – such as a congregation that imagines itself as a friendly church but ignores the fact that certain races, socioeconomic groups, or ethnicities don't receive the same welcome as other visitors. Likewise, a weak story is fixated on some long-gone status, power, prestige, or accomplishment. Churches that live with weak stories often fail to adapt to changing realities because their narrative constructions carry content that no longer holds meaning. Continued growth and spiritual vitality are inextricably linked to the congregation's ability to rewrite its safe and weak stories.

While the contributions to the field of narrative leadership are plentiful, and while many titles promise to revolutionize the practice of storytelling in organizations, most unfortunately continue to understand stories according to Fisher's rational-world paradigm. They fail to see stories as agents in their own right, implying that stories are little more than inert tools used by human leaders to enact organizational change. As has been argued here, this misses an important point – namely, that stories partner with human leaders to have creative impact on organizational life. The story about the FedEx courier cited by Parry and Hansen, for instance, doesn't need a flesh-and-blood storyteller to be effective; it has an impact all on its own as it circulates throughout an organization. Certainly a human leader can leverage this story to manage meanings within an organizational culture, as the narrative leadership field demonstrates. But something altogether different is being proposed here – namely that stories can largely do this work on their own. The narrative leadership literature oriented towards the local church comes closer to taking seriously the creative potential of stories. For instance, a weak story about a church's glory days

¹⁰⁶ For Biblical stories, see Judy Fentress-Williams, "The Official and Unofficial Story," in *Teaching Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Pastoral Formation*, ed. Larry Golemon (Herndon, VA: AI, 2010), 29-46.

tends to circulate throughout a congregation apart from any one particular storyteller. It's not a springboard story told by a flesh-and-blood leader to reach a specific goal. Nor is it an Epic Story disseminated to move the congregation's informal structure towards a specific decision. On the contrary, it circulates independently, demonstrating its own degree of agency by assigning values to the congregation's practices and postures. While a weak story tends to hold a congregation back from regenerative change, another story may indeed have the potential to reassign and reorder its values, thus enabling the church to minister more effectively to its community.

OVTs as Organizational Storytelling

This chapter has argued that stories play an important role in the ongoing production of organizational reality. Stories do more than merely reflect the organization; that is, one cannot discover some underlying essence simply by examining stories, nor can a story be seen as an inert byproduct of organizational culture. On the contrary, stories behave like human leaders – they can *do* things like leaders – by defining organizational reality, aligning relationships, refining individual and organizational identities, and assigning meanings within organizational culture. This chapter now concludes by suggesting ways these research insights can be applied to the study of OVTs.

Few would argue that stories are constantly being used by humans to do things in organizations. Evidence abounds that suggests stories are powerful tools, especially when wielded by skilled storytellers. But storytelling is more than an example of human beings “working the past” to accomplish present-day goals.¹⁰⁷ Stories can, in some instances, act with a degree of autonomy, apart from their human storytellers.

In particular, an OVT is an example of what Cooren calls a hybridized social agent: it is a text constructed by human agents that also operates with a certain degree of its own autonomy by

¹⁰⁷ Linde, *Working the Past*.

speaking on behalf of the organization. An OVT incarnates the local church in a particular way by performing certain behaviors and attitudes. The nature of the incarnated church is not determined by some preexisting reality or core value; or to put it more accurately, an OVT presents only one of many possible versions of congregational reality by privileging certain frames, social configurations, identities, and meanings over others. Any claim to validity a particular version might have is equal to that of any other version, at least based on traditional appeals to the “identity” or “essence” of a church. “This is who we are” is only a claim that has naturalized itself through communicative activity – the congregation is “this way” because human and textual agents have made it this way. Moreover, the core values of a congregation are not immutable; they are equally open to modification as they are to unquestioned reproduction. Thus an OVT should always be approached with a hermeneutic of suspicion, not taking for granted the worldview presented by the narrative, but must be closely investigated to see precisely how they function as constructive agents.¹⁰⁸

The issue is further complicated by the fact that an OVT is a coproduction that presents an individual’s words within editorial constraints, an example of what Mikhail Bakhtin has called *double-voicing*:

[It] is another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they – as it were – know about each other (just as two exchanges in a dialogue know of each other and are structured in this mutual knowledge of each other); it is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ This is not meant to suggest the Church Universal is open to capricious, human-willed change. The point is that First Church does not have to be First Church. A local expression of the Body of Christ has great freedom to organize its ministry and values while remaining within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. A local church may choose a polity that is congregationalist or episcopal, for instance, or it may choose to offer outreach to motorcycle riders or only offer worship services led by an organ and a choir. Though these choices do not fundamentally “make or break” a church, they do profoundly impact the identity and core values of a local church.

¹⁰⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324.

Though a central theme of this chapter has been that stories can do things on their own without a flesh-and-blood leader, an OVT by definition presents a human storyteller sharing “her own story in her own words”. But the “human storyteller” in an OVT is at best a virtualized persona (perhaps an example of Boje’s idea of a VLC or Auvinen’s notion of a ghost leader) that has been produced by church leadership. Thus an OVT is “refracted” speech – the individual’s point of view has been colored by organizational decision-makers and vice versa, resulting in a complex discursive event. Perhaps this is key to understanding how OVTs generate their rhetorical power. Rather than directly exhorting viewers, they obliquely encode messages into the words of others.

Specifically, OVTs perform each of the four leadership functions described above: they define reality, align relationships, refine identities, and assign meanings. First, OVTs – like other stories – can be powerful framing devices in churches. A story can dramatically shift the organization’s interpretive frame away from a narrow, worldly conception of reality towards a framework bounded by a heavenly or eternal perspective. This mode of sensemaking could be understood as “holy imagination” – an interpretive frame that sees God at work in every detail of life. In this frame, a tragic event is not an occasion for sorrow; instead it is an opportunity to see God at work. An OVT depicting a cancer diagnosis could provide an opportunity for a significant shift in the congregation’s interpretive framework, inviting members to place more faith in fervent prayer than in medical science. Such a shift would invite congregants to look for miraculous events that would otherwise be interpreted as a mere coincidence or the intervention of highly skilled doctors. Of course preachers and teachers can inspire a congregation’s holy imagination, but perhaps a story alone could be just as effective. That is, OVTs may be able to dramatically alter the way congregations “see” the world around them.

Secondly, an OVT may be able to legitimize certain structures, programs, or personalities within congregations more successfully than other communicative methods. For instance, consider an OVT that depicts a subject talking about an experience of profound spiritual renewal that occurred at a women’s small group meeting. For a church seeking to attract newcomers to their

small group ministry, an OVT is far more likely to be persuasive than an email blurb that merely advertises the time, location, and cost for the event. The OVT holds rhetorical power because viewers can identify with another person “like me” who found meaning in this ministry. Similarly, a common OVT trope involves mentioning the pastor by first name, denoting a sense of intimacy and close friendship. But this trope is often used in churches with thousands of congregants spread across multiple campuses. In such a context it is unlikely that most congregants will ever meet the pastor face to face, much less develop a close friendship with him. Even though the pastor is an organizational celebrity who appears on the ‘big screen’ during worship and in other prominent church publications, OVTs humanize his persona by using his first name and demonstrating he is a “real” person that can be known on a personal level. This serves to legitimize pastoral leadership, perhaps shoring him up against criticism that he is unapproachable or unavailable for pastoral care.

Thirdly, an OVT is a multilayered story that constructs a complex identity for the narrator and the organization. The individual or family featured in an OVT is ostensibly engaging in autobiographical activity – they are telling “their” story after all – but their story is more stylized than it first appears. As noted above, an OVT is “refracted” through a prism of multiple perspectives and identities, none of which should be taken at face value. It is important to parse the conversation taking place within the OVT narrative to understand as much as possible the two points of view. Moreover, an OVT is not an *in situ* storytelling performance that evolves with each telling based on the context, nor do they give the narrator the opportunity to reassemble his or her identity with each telling. As a video recording, an OVT is a fixed or reified narrative sequence, unaffected by feedback from other storytelling participants. If, as Ochs and Capps note, stories are opportunities for narrators to connect current self-understandings with past and future identities, can an OVT provide the same tools for the negotiation of the self through story? In any case, it does depict the identities of the organization and the individual in specific ways. An OVT about an ex-con becoming a ministry leader is a powerful testimony about the character of the local church.

A viewer comes away with the perception that the church firmly believes in the regenerating power of God and is comfortable rubbing elbows with people who are normally marginalized by society. This presentation has a reflexive effect on the church itself, too. After seeing the experience of the ex-con in an OVT, other viewers who feel marginalized may be more willing to get involved in the life of the local church.

Finally, an OVT forges new meanings at the nexus between an individual's story, the church's organizational story, and Biblical story. Whereas most organizational storytelling research has focused on the interaction between the first two types of stories (the personal story and the organizational story), it largely ignores the impact of the third, the stories of Scripture.¹¹⁰ Theologically and sociologically, the importance of Scripture in the Church cannot be overstated. Most notably, Biblical stories provide the "stock" of meanings that are picked up and used by individual storytellers. An OVT may for instance depict a narrator as a longsuffering Job-figure, a waffling Peter-figure, or a competent Esther-figure. And when it does so, only certain aspects of these characters' identity can be foregrounded. Peter is seen in various places throughout Scripture as a fearless apostle and as a bumbling coward – precisely which aspect is emphasized reflects a decision on the part of storytellers to foreground one meaning instead of others. OVTs also encode moral instruction into their storylines. Homosexuality, divorce, and drug use are commonly disparaged in OVTs, for instance. They are not merely innocuous activities, but are instead laden with specific meanings that contradict what the ideal participant in the local church looks like.

All of these issues are components of the larger question, following Parry and Hansen, of how exactly OVTs can be seen as performing leadership functions within local churches. The

¹¹⁰ Interestingly, one team of scholars has suggested the addition of a fifth flow to McPhee and Zaug's four flow typology, what they call a *syncretic superstructure*, or a "shifting macrosystem of meaning schemas". Conceivably this could be one way to talk about the influence of biblical stories on the church's communication. See Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik & Virginia McDermott, "The Constitution of Employee-Abusive Organizations: A Communication Flows Theory," *Communication Theory* 18 (2008), 304-333. Quote taken from page 310.

literature clearly shows that stories have formative influences much like flesh-and-blood leaders within organizational contexts, and it stands to reason that OVTs should have the same impact within congregations. The findings presented in chapters 5 and 6 will unpack how this occurs. But first, chapter 3 turns to the biblical and theological implications of seeing stories as leaders.

CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL CONTEXT: THE OLD, OLD STORIES

The previous chapter reviewed recent developments in organizational communication theory and it argued that stories do more than merely reflect organizational values. Instead, stories are constructive agents that act like leaders – they can *do* things in organizations much like flesh-and-blood leaders can. This takes place in four ways: stories 1) define organizational reality, 2) align social relationships, 3) refine individual and organizational identities, and 4) assign meanings within organizational culture. This chapter extends this argument by demonstrating that stories perform these same functions in Scripture. First, Nathan's story in 2 Samuel 12 shows how a story can dramatically effect social change. Secondly, Jesus' parables demonstrate how storytelling shapes group formation and identity, teaches listeners how to read the world differently, and makes the presence of God indelibly real to followers. Thirdly, Paul's conversion narratives show how stories can be used to model values and behaviors for a community. Finally, this chapter will close with a discussion about how these examples from Scripture can be seen as normative for the contemporary Church.

Nathan and King David

The prophet Nathan uses a story in 2 Samuel 12 to effect deep change in the heart of King David. Nathan is a mysterious figure in Scripture, appearing three times, though never accompanied by introduction or explanatory introduction.¹ Despite the paucity of information, some commentators have composed complete biographical sketches of his life in order to fill in

¹ He also appears in 2 Samuel 7 (discussed below) and again in 1 Kings 1 when Solomon is crowned as David's successor. Nathan does appear a fourth time in 1 Chronicles 17, but this passage is a clear parallel of 2 Samuel 7.

the gaps.² While such a project seems overly ambitious, a short review of his relationship with King David can provide crucial details that shed light on their interaction in 2 Samuel 12.

Nathan makes his debut in 2 Samuel 7 and as he does in chapter 12, Nathan appears in the king's presence unannounced, both to the reader and seemingly to David as well. This suggests that Nathan had access to the king on a regular basis, perhaps as an advisor. The nature of their relationship is brought into sharper focus in 7:2 when David proposes the building of a temple, presumably one to rival the extravagance of his own "house of cedar". Nathan quickly authorizes David's intentions, and even figuratively issues the king a blank check for his building campaign: "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you" (7:3).

It is peculiar that Nathan would be so eager to agree to David's proposal. A temple was a massive undertaking, potentially costing the young nation a fortune in building materials and labor costs. Moreover it represented a significant theological shift for Israel. Up to that point in their history, the Lord's presence among them had been ephemeral, coming and going freely: "I [the Lord] have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling" (7:6). A fixed house, it seems, would be an affront to God's sovereignty by hindering the Lord's ability to freely move from place to place. Yet without consulting God, Nathan hastily authorizes David to build a permanent temple.

Nathan's eagerness could be understood in at least two ways. On the one hand, Nathan may have had a sober understanding of the value (and inherent precariousness) of his position, feeling it was in his own self-interest to be the royal yes-man. David himself was once a favored member of King Saul's royal entourage, and just as David secured his position in Saul's court with

² Gwilym Jones has produced the most complete exploration of Nathan to date. See his *The Nathan Narratives*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).

the music of his lyre, perhaps Nathan hoped his encouraging words could secure his own place alongside the king.³

Alternatively, perhaps Nathan agreed to David's proposal to demonstrate the legitimacy of the prophetic tradition and to prove that he still had an integral role in the nation's decision-making process. As David consolidated his power over Israel, Nathan surely wrestled with the question of what role the prophetic tradition is to play in the new kingdom. Should a prophet of the Lord submit to the authority of the king, or should a prophet continue to operate independently of royal control, much like his predecessors had done? Samuel, for instance, had made it crystal-clear he was in charge when he anointed Saul (and later David) king over God's people. But as the monarchy established its own legitimacy, the nature of the prophetic role became more ambiguous. So by authorizing David to build a temple, Nathan in effect asserted that the monarchy remained under the rule and reign of God, and as a corollary, the king should submit to the Lord's prophet, Nathan. Besides, if Nathan refused to bless David's plans and the king opted to go ahead with the temple construction anyway, it would have been clear to everyone that the prophetic tradition had been fully eclipsed by royal authority.

Whatever Nathan's motivation, he at least has the courage to change his mind. Later that night, God speaks and instructs him to tell David that he is not to build a temple after all. Instead, one of David's descendants will build the temple, and in exchange, God will "establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam 7:13). Nathan does not hesitate to deliver the message, and the text suggests David willingly accepted Nathan's words. But then Nathan conspicuously disappears from the rest of the scene as David prays directly to God: "you have promised this good thing to your servant; now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you" (7:28-29).

³ Kevin Bodner holds a similar perspective. He calls Nathan a "novelist" whose extraordinary degree of political savvy helped him "stage manage" various aspects of the Davidic monarchy. See Keith Bodner, "Nathan: Prophet, Politician and Novelist?" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 95 (2001): 43-54.

Following this prayer, Nathan disappears from the story for some time. In his absence, David grows increasingly confident in his royal role. He largely consolidates his kingdom, and except for an ongoing series of skirmishes with the Ammonites, David appears quite comfortable. So much so, in fact, he makes the unusual decision to send his officers out to do battle on his behalf while he stays behind in Jerusalem (2 Sam 11). This of course sets the scene for his affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah – events which prompt the sudden return of the prophet.

As chapter 12 begins, David's power and bravado have swelled to a crescendo while Nathan, perhaps emboldened by his prior interaction with the king, resolves to confront David's misdeeds. He enters suddenly and without introduction or framing cues, launches into a story:

There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him. (12:1-4)

Concise and dramatic, the story depicts two men: one rich, the other poor. Nathan gives very little detail about the first, noting only that he "had very many flocks and herds". In contrast to this bald description, Nathan goes to great lengths to describe the intimate relationship between the poor man and his lone ewe lamb that lived in his home "like a daughter". But when an unnamed traveler visits the rich man, the story comes to a heartbreaking climax as the rich man slaughters the poor man's ewe lamb instead of one of his own.

Nathan's account ends here – he passes no moral judgment on the actions of anyone in the story. Technically speaking, he draws no conclusions at all – the sense of injustice in the story is supplied solely by the hearer. Nathan offers no narrative resolution because he correctly assumes David will engage the story to draw his own conclusions.

When David responds, his reaction is emphatic: "He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; He shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this

thing, and because he had no pity” (12:5b-6). Yet this reaction is unexpected. Readers of course know this story performance takes place in a broader narrative sequence immediately following David’s conspiracy with Joab to murder Uriah. The motive was ostensibly to hide the fact that David had impregnated Uriah’s wife Bathsheba while he was away fighting in the king’s army. Read within this broader context, Nathan’s story evidently draws a clear parallel between the rich man and the king, and highlights how David selfishly took away another man’s “ewe lamb”. Walter Brueggemann follows this reading, noting the word choice in the passage subtly implies the rich man “raped the daughterlike treasure of the poor man” and that David “took what was not his and treated it as if it were his own.”⁴ Even the narrator hints at this conclusion at the end of the previous chapter: “The thing that David had done displeased the Lord” (2 Sam 11:27).

But David does not interpret Nathan’s story this way, at least not initially. If he had, he would have taken great offense at Nathan’s accusatory words, perhaps jettisoning the prophet once and for all. Instead, David expresses horror at the actions of somebody else: “the man who did this....” The king does not recognize the story was intended as an indictment against him until Nathan finally tells him point-blank, “You are the man!” (12:7).

Some have argued that the genre of Nathan’s story confused David. Uriel Simon, for instance, describes Nathan’s story as a “juridical parable”, a camouflaged recounting of a legal offense told with the goal of condemning someone who has committed a similar offense.⁵ While there’s little evidence in Scripture to support ‘juridical parable’ as a distinct literary genre, Simon does raise an interesting question – did David think Nathan’s story was real or fictional? That is, did David assume Nathan was describing an actual legal case that had taken place within his kingdom, or did he assume it was an allegorical story told to make a point about something else

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 280.

⁵ Uriel Simon, “The Poor Man’s Ewe-Lamb: An Example of a Juridical Parable,” *Biblica* 48 (1967): 207-242.

altogether? If Nathan was describing an actual case, David's royal position gave him a mandate and a responsibility to respond decisively to such an injustice.

Perhaps David indeed interprets the story as an actual case, pronouncing what sounds like a legal judgment in 12:5b-6: "He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; He shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity'". However, a closer reading of the text suggests David may not have interpreted Nathan's story as a real-life legal case after all. First, scholars note that the language of the story is stylistically different from the surrounding text, suggesting it should be read as something other than a factual report.⁶ In addition to poetic devices like consonantal alliteration and rhyme, verses 1-4 include vocabulary unusual for conversational prose. In fact, the Hebrew words for rich (*ashir*) and poor (*rush*) used here do not occur in the same verse anywhere else in Scripture outside of Proverbs. Secondly, this story lacks any other "names, places, witnesses, or other petitioners" that would be customary in a juridical context.⁷ Hugh Pyper agrees, noting the juridical element only becomes visible when this story is read in the context of the larger arc of the Samuel-Kings narrative, which of course wasn't available to the characters involved in the local storytelling interaction.⁸ Thirdly, David's supposed legal pronouncement in 12:5 is not as clear-cut when one considers that the English phrase "the man who has done this deserves to die" is constructed from a curious translation of the Hebrew word *ben-mawet*, which literally means "son of death".⁹

⁶ See especially J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, 4 vols (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981).

⁷ Bruce Birch, *1 and 2 Samuel: New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol. 2*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 1292.

⁸ Hugh Pyper, "David as Reader: 2 Samuel 12:1-15 and the Poetics of Fatherhood," *BI* 8 no. 4 (October 2000): 441-443.

⁹ NRSV, KJV and NIV all use similar wording, while the NASB adds the literal translation in a footnote. The CEB settles on the phrase "the one who did this is demonic".

Perhaps, as Kyle McCarter suggests, “son of death” was intended not as a formal indictment, but instead as a derogatory term to express horror at the rich man’s actions.¹⁰

Based on this evidence, it is difficult to conclude that David interpreted Nathan’s tale as a factual report. On the contrary, David most likely understood the story was allegorical in nature. As with any allegory, storytellers hope hearers to come away with an intended meaning, but allegories do not carry static or fixed meanings that can be universally extracted. Allegorical stories are prone to misunderstandings since meaning can be construed in multiple ways depending on how elements within the story are interpreted.

Table 1: Traditional interpretation of Nathan's story in 2 Samuel 12

Story Character	Real-life character
Rich man	King David
Poor man	Uriah
Ewe lamb	Bathsheba
Traveler	--

So how exactly did David understand Nathan’s story? While modern readers can’t peer inside the king’s mind, a rudimentary deconstruction analysis can at least shed light on possible alternative interpretations.¹¹ First, the sharp binary opposition between rich and poor raises a red flag. Western readers in particular are notorious for constructing binary dualities and collapsing meaning into two mutually exclusive categories: good versus evil, male versus female, black versus white, right versus wrong, etc. These opposing categories then fall into an implicit hierarchy – good trumps evil, and so forth. But this kind of narrative bifurcation cannot account for subtle differences or tertiary points of view. A strict binary grid excludes what David Boje calls *rebel voices* – perspectives that are not considered or included in a story’s interpretation.

¹⁰ Kyle McCarter, *2 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984).

¹¹ Deconstruction analysis is a method described by David Boje in his *Narrative Methods for Organizational & Communication Research* (London: Sage, 2001).

Following the traditional reading of Nathan's story, the traveler is a significant rebel voice. Even though his arrival prompts the slaughter of the ewe lamb, his perspective is never considered. His voice gets lost in the "real" story about David and Uriah. Also noteworthy in the traditional reading of this story is the binary opposition of male and female. It's no secret that most cultures are gendered in such a way that they privilege masculine traits over feminine, or at least view male as active and female as passive. This implicit culturally-embedded hierarchy creates an interpretative bias that prevents most readers from seeing the passive victim (the ewe lamb) as anyone other than a female, namely, Bathsheba.

Table 2: Alternative interpretation of Nathan's story in 2 Samuel 12

Story Character	Real-life character
Rich man	Joab
Poor man	--
Ewe lamb	Uriah
Traveler	King David

But by bracketing these interpretive biases it becomes easier to see how David could have understood Nathan's story differently. In fact, Jeremy Schipper has offered a compelling theory that David "overinterpreted" the story by assuming it is actually about the murder of Uriah (the ewe lamb) at the hand of general Joab (the rich man).¹² In this scenario, David saw himself not as the rich man, but as the traveler for whom the ewe lamb is killed. David likely arranged for Joab to kill others, particularly Abner (2 Sam 3) and Absalom's general Amasa (2 Sam 20). Although David publically distanced himself from Joab and emphatically denied he had anything to do with those killings, David may have thought the subtext of Nathan's story accused him of yet another arranged murder. After all, David did not publicly condemn Joab for Uriah's death as he had in the past (2 Sam 3:28-29), but instead offered him comfort: "Do not let this matter trouble you, for the

¹² Jeremy Schipper, "Did David Overinterpret Nathan's Parable in 2 Samuel 12:1-6?" *JBL* 126 no. 2 (2007): 383-407.

sword devours now one and now another” (11:25). This leniency left room for Nathan to suspect him of arranging, or at least being involved in, Uriah’s death:

Upon hearing the parable, David may desire to correct this dangerous oversight. If he thinks Nathan sees him as the traveler, he may want to emphasize that, like the traveler, he did not call for the slaughtering. He could create such emphasis through a strong condemnation of the rich man, whom he identifies as Joab. Thus, David falls back on a proven technique which worked well for him...In v5-6, he delivers an emotionally charged condemnation of the murderer, something he neglected to offer in 11:25¹³

Hearing David’s strong condemnation of the rich man’s actions in 12:5-6, Nathan recognizes that the king had missed his intended meaning of the story. David was fully invested in an alternative interpretation of the story and failed to consider that the prophet understood the story differently. So in 12:7 Nathan breaks into the king’s misreading to breathlessly announce that David is not the traveler – he is “the man”. In this moment, two versions of reality collide. According to Nathan’s version, David is a murderer and a “taker”. He alone is culpable for the death of Uriah. By contrast, David’s version places the primary blame for the killing on Joab. He himself is barely an auxiliary to the ewe lamb’s murder – he is a voiceless, nameless traveler who received a sacrifice he did not request. In the end, however, David’s version of the story shrivels when confronted with an oracle from the Lord that detailed the heinousness of his sin. By all indications, he finally comes to see things the way Nathan intended when he confesses in 12:13, “I have sinned against the Lord”.

Several insights can be gleaned from this storytelling interaction. First, Nathan’s story fits Yiannis Gabriel’s formal criteria exceedingly well: it was a narrative with “simple but resonant plots and characters, involving narrative skill, entailing risk, and aiming to entertain, persuade and win over.”¹⁴ It was poetically rich and emotionally charged. Too, it was skillfully told and it elicited a dynamic response from David. Yet none of these factors guaranteed the story’s success.

¹³ Schipper, “Overinterpret Nathan’s Parable,” 389.

¹⁴ Yiannis Gabriel, *Storytelling in Organizations: Facts, Fictions and Fantasies* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 22.

Stories are not static, nor are they containers that carry fixed truths. Meaning must be renegotiated with every new telling. Even though Nathan intended one set of meanings, David came away with something altogether different. David preferred to hide behind a “safe” or “weak” story to insulate himself from an uncomfortable reality.¹⁵ Nathan’s story took on a life of its own, operating with its own sense of agency and constructing meaning that the prophet did not intend. Nathan in fact had to intervene in order to make his intended meaning clear. In this case, Nathan participated alongside his own story to construct meaning and accomplish his goals.

Social dynamics also play a significant role in story performance and reception. On the one hand, plumbing the “deep structures” that undergird social life may offer clues about how stories work.¹⁶ The relationship between David and Nathan was characterized by ambiguity and power inequality, which likely prompted Nathan to confront David indirectly via a story. And if Shipper’s reading is correct, David may have been treading lightly around a power issue as well when he first reacted to Nathan’s story. That is, his reaction attempted to squelch suspicions that he had anything to do with Uriah’s murder.

On the other hand, stories are creative tools that can be used to reproduce hidden power structures or turn the social order on its head. Stories provide creative resources, or “means of enablement, as a vehicle through which social actors can radically transform the way they conceive of a particular social structure.”¹⁷ In this case, Nathan’s story provoked a significant change in the way the king exercised his power. Left unchecked, David’s reign could have grown more and more violent, bringing about disastrous consequences. But by deploying a story, Nathan

¹⁵ See Gil Rendle, “Narrative Leadership and Renewed Congregational Identity,” in *Finding Our Story*, ed. Larry Golemon (Herndon, VA: AI, 2010), 21-40.

¹⁶ Dennis Mumby, “The Political Function of Narrative in Organizations,” *CM* 54 (June 1987): 113-127.

¹⁷ Mumby, “Political Function,” 124.

tapped into a rich resource that put him in a position to confront David and bring about dramatic social change.

The Parables of Jesus

Jesus parables provide another opportunity to examine storytelling in Scripture. Scholars have filled vast libraries exploring Jesus' parables, and for good reason: they are as mysterious as they are powerful, and have been central to the Church's preaching for centuries.¹⁸ Though this section doesn't offer anything substantially new to the myriads of debates surrounding the interpretation of Jesus' parables, it does show how these stories performed important leadership functions among his earliest followers.

First, Jesus' oblique manner of telling stories is a tactic to manage social boundaries and group identity. Matthew 13 records Jesus' performance of the Parable of the Sower, delivered to a large crowd that had gathered near the lakeshore to hear Jesus preach. The crowd had grown so large, in fact, that Jesus climbed into a boat and sailed out to the middle of a lake where he could address all the people at once. "He told them many things in parables," (Matt 13:3), including this story:

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. (Matt 13:3-8)

¹⁸ Adolf Jülicher's *Die Gleichnissreden Jesu* (1886) is often credited as the first major work to shape scholarly thinking about Jesus' parables. Breaking with centuries of tradition, Jülicher argued that the parables were not allegories with one central theme or teaching, but instead were extended similes that can be interpreted in a variety of ways. For a long time, his work stood as the definitive understanding of Jesus' parables. In the latter half of the 20th century, however, several scholars revisited the topic. Particularly notable are classic studies by Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1963); Eta Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition* (trans. John Sturdy; London: SPCK, 1966); Dan Otto Via, Jr., *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: FP, 1967), and John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). For an excellent review of more recent literature about Jesus' parables see David Gowler's *What Are They Saying About the Parables?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000).

Later, the disciples come to Jesus privately and ask for an explanation of this parable. Only in this setting, alone with his disciples, Jesus unpacks the message he was trying to deliver:

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. (Matt 13:19-23)

Many have noted that this oblique manner of telling stories is typical of Jesus' ministry. In fact, he seems to use parables to intentionally obfuscate knowledge about the Kingdom of God.

When the disciples themselves challenge him about this, Jesus' answer is surprisingly candid:

Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ... But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Matt 13:11-12, 16-17)

Jesus tells them the secrets of the Kingdom of God are not for everyone, but only for a few. This is a prime example of what David Boje calls *terse storytelling*, or “an abbreviated and succinct simplification of the story in which parts of the plot, some of the characters, and segments of the sequence of events are left to the hearer’s imagination.”¹⁹ As discussed in the previous chapter, terse storytelling is a powerful social device for the demarcation of group boundaries. The act of telling a terse story creates two groups: those with insider information (who know the full story), and those who are outsiders (who know little or none of the story). Telling a terse story with key omissions is like publicly referencing a secret that reinforces social bonds between insiders who know the secret, while outsiders are reminded that they are in fact outsiders.

¹⁹ David Boje, “The Storytelling Organization: A Study of Story Performance in an Office-Supply Firm,” *ASQ* 36 no. 1 (March 1991): 116.

Jesus creates social boundaries between his followers and the crowds by invoking a terse story. The basic theme of Jesus' parable suggests that only a few will bear fruit in the Kingdom of God; the vast majority of people will not. By sharing his interpretation with only a few (the disciples), Jesus tacitly suggests that they are indeed the "good soil" – they alone are privileged with secret meaning. By contrast, the rest of the crowd is rocky, thorny, or too close to a path where the evil one will come to snatch the seed away. This storytelling strategy creates a clear demarcation between in-group and out-group, between those who understand and those who don't, between good soil and bad soil. However, this demarcation is only clear to insiders (the disciples).²⁰ For the crowd, for whom Jesus did not provide the interpretation, this story produced uncertain meaning – or what Karl Weick might call equivocality.²¹ It's quite possible that there were as many unique understandings of Jesus' story as there were individuals in the crowd. But by providing an interpretive frame for only a few (the disciples) Jesus reduced equivocality among them. They were given a common understanding of the story, and importantly, they also *knew* they shared a common understanding of the story. Those on the outside, they were told, cannot understand the Kingdom of God because their hearts "have become calloused" (Matt 13:15).

Jesus' parable about the Sower also provides a common vocabulary of meanings for his followers, which is an important touchstone in the formation of communal identity. Drawing on a common story and its implicit social map, group members can coordinate their activities, develop shared goals, and plot out a group trajectory. In the disciples' case, the story instructs them to bear "fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty" (Matt 13:23). The group's direction and mission are inextricably linked to strengthening social bonds and

²⁰ As Hauerwas famously said, the world needs the Church to tell them they are in fact the world. See especially his *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (South Bend, IN: UNDP, 1981): 36-52.

²¹ See especially Karl Weick, *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, 2nd ed. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); and *Sensemaking in Organizations*, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1995).

identity construction – as individuals work together they reinforce the idea that they are indeed a community of “good seeds” that have the unique capacity to grow.

Secondly, Jesus’ stories taught his followers how to make sense of the world. Jesus uses his stories as sensemaking devices – they form a holy imagination for those who listen, and more importantly, for those who choose to engage with the story and dive into its world. Jesus’ parables offer an answer to the question, “What’s going on here?” that penetrates beneath the visible to uncover deeper spiritual truths.

Much like narrative therapy’s search for unique outcomes, Jesus’ parables challenge predominant cultural storylines with examples that do not fit the typical pattern.²² A parable highlights a unique outcome and gives new meaning to something largely taken for granted. For example, Jesus uses common imagery in his stories. Farmers, soil, seeds, birds, wedding parties, roads, yeast, coins, and pearls were everyday items in the lives of first century Palestinian Jews and likewise played prominent roles in Jesus’ parables.²³ The sheer banality of these images, however, disguises the degree to which they have already been inscribed with certain meanings. These items, images and characters are already part of larger stories that understand them as unremarkable, even meaningless. A seed, for instance, is little more than one component of the planting-harvest cycle; when given enough time, water, and nutrients a seed might grow into a plant that can be harvested and eaten. Outside of this context, a seed signifies little else.

But Jesus uses the image of a seed to carry an enormous amount of narrative freight. In the Parable of the Sower the seed behaves in an expected fashion for most of the parable. It falls onto the ground and lands in recognizable places – along a path or in shallow soil. And most of the outcomes are unremarkable – much of the seed dies or is eaten by birds. But a few of the seeds

²² See Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1990).

²³ Sallie McFague has noted this as well, and has argued that all Christian speech in turn must be “ordinary, contemporary, and imagistic”. See Sallie McFague TeSelle, “Parable, Metaphor and Theology,” *JAAR* 42 no. 4 (1974): 630-645. Quote taken from 631.

take root to produce a surprising yield of one hundredfold, sixtyfold, or thirtyfold. Though much of this story fits the expected pattern, Jesus highlights one outcome that is highly unusual. Certainly seeds do not normally produce a yield of such exuberant proportions. But by highlighting this unexpected outcome, the parable provides a new interpretive frame for understanding failure. According to the dominant cultural frame, the Parable of the Sower is about irresponsible sowing and loss. Why bother sowing seed at all if most will fail to grow? Shouldn't the sower be more discerning where he scatters his seed? Jesus challenges his disciples to see things differently by drawing attention to the exceptions to the rule. Some seed, he insists, will take root and produce a yield. Alternatively, one could ask, 'Why bother preaching about the Kingdom if most people won't listen?' Because, Jesus' parable suggests, some *will* hear the Word and multiply. Instead of fretting over the crowds who do not respond, Jesus invites his followers to focus on the few who do respond. According to the logic of the story, their few responses will be exponentially more fruitful than those of the crowd.²⁴

By teaching in parables, Jesus teaches his disciples to read the world in a particular way where exceptions, hidden meaning and alternative storylines are privileged and celebrated. To push this point even further, Jesus' parables teach his disciples how to challenge the taken-for-granted understandings of the world by thinking *subversively*.²⁵ Jesus posed a threat to the political and religious elites of his day, but by communicating indirectly via parables, Jesus disguised the revolutionary nature of his message. This strategy was only partly effective, however. Luke attests

²⁴ Crossan would likely disagree with this point. He suggests instead that Jesus' parables are "the primary and immediate expressions of his own experience of God," and "are the ontologico-poetic articulation of the kingdom's in-breaking upon himself." Fruitfulness is related to one's spiritual condition, not the response of the crowds. See Crossan, "The Seed Parables of Jesus," *JBL* 92 no. 2 (1973): 265.

²⁵ See of course William Herzog's *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: WJK, 1994). Herzog's approach is fascinating, and there is much to be learned from it. But some of his analyses seem stretched. He reads The Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25, for instance, as a critique of the landowner's greed and an oppressive economic system. The third servant (who refuses to participate and instead buries his talent in the ground) is the hero of the story, which Herzog titles "The Vulnerability of the Whistleblower".

that his subversive teaching eventually caught up with him: when “the scribes and chief priests realized that he had told this parable against them they wanted to lay hands on him” (20:19).

In The Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus’ subversive storytelling prowess is on full display. According to the Gospel of Luke, the story is told during a discussion with a certain lawyer:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:25-29)

The episode has obvious confrontational overtones. The verb *ekpeirazo* (“to test”) in 10:25 indicates there was hostility in the lawyer’s question. By the same token, the lawyer is likely a recognized expert on the law, so it’s difficult to imagine much heartfelt sincerity behind his questions. Commentator Alan Culpepper adds that the lawyer may be attempting to draw Jesus into a long-running debate about appropriate socio-religious boundaries and the duty to maintain the social order.²⁶ Jesus however refuses to be drawn into the debate directly, and instead opts to tell a story:

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (10:29-37)

One interesting aspect of Jesus’ story is that it lacks so many key details. For example, Jesus includes virtually nothing about the traveler – his race, ethnic group, socioeconomic status,

²⁶ R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke: New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

destination, and reason for his trip are all mysteries. No motive is given for the attack along the road and no explanation is given for the unwillingness of the priest and the Levite to assist the wounded traveler. All of these details are left to be filled in by the audience's imagination. Jesus assumes his hearers will fill in those gaps with their own assumptions about how the world works.

By making his audience complicit in the construction of the story, Jesus masterfully toys with their expectations to disguise the subversive nature of his story. The first two passers-by were Jewish elites – a priest and a Levite. Listeners may have initially expected the third passerby would also be a social elite, which would have, in and of itself, given the story a strong subversive tinge. Instead, Jesus identifies the third character as a Samaritan. Samaritans were an ethnically mixed race whose enmity with Jews was well known. In fact, Luke had just finished recording an episode when a Samaritan village rejected Jesus' ministry (9:52-55). Thus the presence of a Samaritan is a shock – “shattering all expectations” about the proper adherence to Jewish law – especially in a discussion with a Jewish legal expert who is regarded as the epitome of ‘good Jewishness’ and an exemplar of what it meant to maintain ritual and social purity.²⁷

So by depicting a Samaritan as the hero of his story, Jesus seems to be making the point that evaluating one's actions should not depend on ethnic categories or social location. Such a message would certainly be controversial enough to provoke a backlash, but a closer reading shows that Jesus' story is even more scandalous than it first appears. As surprising as it is that a Samaritan should play such a pivotal role, the Samaritan man is not the *only* hero of the story.²⁸ The story does not end with his compassionate act along the road – he goes on to take the wounded man to an inn, entrusts his care to an innkeeper, and promises to reimburse any other expenses related to the man's care. If Jesus was merely trying to make the point about compassion

²⁷ Culpepper, *Gospel of Luke*, 229.

²⁸ Many scholars make this error and fail to seriously consider the role of the other characters in the story. See especially Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 175.

or inclusion of outsiders, the story could have ended in verse 35 with little consequence. But as Bruce Longenecker insists, the integrity of this story depends on including all the characters, especially the innkeeper. Innkeepers in antiquity were “morally dubious” schemers who “were not to be trusted.”²⁹ In fact there was a great deal at risk for the Samaritan man when he entrusted the innkeeper with the wounded man and his two denarii – upon return he could have found that he had been swindled out of his money and the man was dead. By the same token, the innkeeper also exposed himself to significant risk by trusting that the Samaritan man would soon return and reimburse him for additional care-giving expenses. Since both parties – the innkeeper and the Samaritan traveler – found themselves in vulnerable positions (not to mention the extreme vulnerability of the injured man!), Longenecker suggests the meaning of this story is ultimately about radical partnership that transgresses conventional social boundaries. The parable “depicts an uncommon association of figures, a surprising collective, an unprecedented model of mutual trust and consequent service” that provided a dynamic model of what it meant to be a part of Jesus’ community of faith.³⁰

Jesus surely knew his followers would soon face intense persecution, and the only chance they had at survival was to live in a new reality framed by a holy imagination, where they could boldly place radical, transgressive trust in each other. David Kopp and colleagues suggest that storytelling is a particularly effective tool for organizations facing crisis situations. Stories help groups deal with stress by presenting narratives of similar organizations overcome challenging circumstances.³¹ So perhaps Jesus used this story to demonstrate what radical trust and community look like in spite of extreme risk. It is nothing short of an immensely subversive message, and

²⁹ Bruce Longenecker, “The Story of the Samaritan and the Innkeeper (Luke 10:30-35): A Study in Character Rehabilitation,” *BI* 17 (2009): 430.

³⁰ Longenecker, “Samaritan and the Innkeeper”, 444.

³¹ David Kopp et al, “‘Relaax, I Remember the Recession in the Early 1980s...’: Organizational Storytelling as a Crisis Management Tool,” *Human Resource Development Quarterly* 22 no. 3 (Fall 2011): 373-385.

Jesus surely understood the high stakes of such a risk. But he also recognized that, without the courage to extend a trusting hand of fellowship across cultural boundaries and social strata, his movement had little chance of success. Only a story could effectively reframe reality by demonstrating radical partnership and covenantal love that breaks so many rules.

Thirdly, Jesus' parables make the presence of God indelibly real for his followers.³² This is best understood with the metaphor of *ghost leadership*. Tommi Auvinen describes ghost leadership as "a discursive character, a leader that is constructed in organizational storytelling."³³ Ghost leaders are constructed through stories told either by or about the organization's leader, and make him or her seem dynamically present even when physically absent. These discursively-formed leaders "'do' things that we often recommend leaders do, such as inspire followers".³⁴ To illustrate, David Boje and Grace Ann Rosile argue Wal-Mart constructed a ghost leader (they call it a 'specter') of founder Sam Walton in order to sustain a particular corporate culture following Walton's death. They suggest a ghost leader "allows a less charismatic administration to carry on the ideology ... [and] allows the routinization of everyday administrative routines and practices."³⁵

To translate the ghost leadership metaphor into Christian terms, Jesus' depictions of God in his parables give hearers a glimpse of what the Father is like. For example, Jesus' parable of the Persistent Widow depicts the Father in a dynamic way:

³² This section is not intended as any sort of statement about the ontological existence of God. Scripture clearly argues for the real and personal sense of God's presence with his people. The sociological process of constructing a leadership identity or 'presence' does not necessitate any sort of Feuerbachian 'projection' theory, i.e., that God is merely a projection of human desire. The way God is conceptualized within a cultural system is never determinative of God's true nature. The point here is that Jesus' stories function in a particular way to present a dynamic picture of God amidst his people.

³³ Tommi Auvinen, "The Ghost Leader: An Empirical Study on Narrative Leadership," *Electronic Journal of Business Ethics and Organizational Studies* 17 no. 1 (2012): 4.

³⁴ Ken Parry and Hans Hansen, "The Organizational Story as Leadership," *Leadership* 3 no.3 (2007): 282.

³⁵ David Boje and Grace Ann Rosile, "Specters of Wal-Mart: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Stories of Sam Walton's Ghost," *Critical Discourse Studies* 5 no. 2 (May 2008): 172.

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:1-8)

This story uses hyperbole to construct a literary foil for God. The judge in the story has no concern for anyone at all, and by identifying the protagonist as a widow, the parable further demonstrates the judge’s hard-heartedness. Securing justice for widows was a cultural trope in ancient Israel – Luke Timothy Johnson calls it a “shorthand for covenantal loyalty” under the Torah.³⁶ But the judge is so ironically disingenuous that he has no concern for applying the law at all – not even for the most needy of cases. He’s a caricature, an exaggerated picture of a petty bureaucrat who is motivated only by selfishness rather than by justice or compassion. His character is so overdrawn, in fact, it can only be read as the polar opposite reflection of the overwhelming goodness of God. If a judge who neither fears God nor has any respect for people can be persuaded to act on behalf of a pesky widow, surely a God who is compassionate and responsive will not hesitate to exuberantly answer prayer. Jesus himself invites the same conclusions when he asks “will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?” (18:7). In the Greek, Jesus’ question is constructed with an *ou mé* double negative, which expects an emphatic “yes!” or “of course!” But to drive home the point, he answers his own rhetorical question, saying God will “quickly”³⁷ answer his people’s prayers. In vivid contrast to the selfish, cranky judge, God is supremely responsive to the prayers of his people and is vigilantly concerned with all matters of

³⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 269.

³⁷ Alternately translated as “soon”, “suddenly” or “unexpectedly”. See I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 676.

justice. The story makes the character so sharply evident that God seems to come alive in the midst of those gathered to hear it.

Many of Jesus' other stories have a similar effect – for instance the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) and the three parables recorded in Luke 15 (The Parable of the Lost Coin, The Parable of the Lost Sheep, and The Parable of the Prodigal Son). Each of these stories conveys an important message about God in a memorable way. But more importantly, they construct a character that jumps out of the confines of the story to speak, act, and move in the lives of hearers. The Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, for instance, is more than a character in a story – he becomes a heavenly Father who is still waiting for his wayward children to come home. As these characters are created and promulgated through story, they become “real” leaders who can have a concrete impact on the way hearers live. The discursive presentation of the Father being “filled with compassion” (Luke 15:20) has “real” power to soften hearts and draw hearers to repentance. Of course Jesus could have used other tactics to elicit a response. He could have simply prescribed a set of rules or guidelines to follow, and he could have enforced his will with various mechanisms of social coercion. But Jesus knew that stories possess their own agency and potential for greater influence than any other form of discourse.

To summarize this section, Jesus' parables perform important leadership functions among his followers. They manage social boundaries and strengthen group identity. They teach listeners how to read the world in new ways. And they depict God in such a way that the Heavenly Father becomes dynamically present amidst his followers. More than reflecting some preexisting social reality, Jesus' parables actively construct a new reality. That is, his stories play a significant role in inaugurating the Kingdom of God on earth.

The Apostle Paul

This final section examines how Paul's conversion stories perform leadership functions within the Christian community. Exploring the narrative dimension of Paul's writing is nothing

new – in fact, a bevy of recent scholarship has focused heavily on the “narrative substructure” of Paul’s thought, worldview, theology, and preaching. One of the first scholars to pay attention to narrative dynamics in Paul’s writings was Richard Hayes.³⁸ Also noteworthy is an intriguing volume entitled *Narrative Dynamics in Paul* that offers contributions from an entire panel of distinguished New Testaments scholars.³⁹ Most recently, N.T. Wright’s magisterial four-volume *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* outlines in great detail the “cosmic” story and the composite “subplots” undergirding Paul’s theology.⁴⁰ While these investigations have their place, they unfortunately have little value for understanding how stories impact social life. Certainly there is a narrative substructure behind Paul’s writing, but tracing the contours of such a substructure is a tenuous project that hinges on the unwise forensic task of psychoanalyzing a historical figure. This section, on the contrary, will focus on actual stories told by (and about) the Apostle Paul in Acts and his letter to the Galatians. These stories represent multiple antenarrative attempts to make sense of Paul’s conversion experience, while some were later reified and held up as models for other converts to imitate.

To begin, it must be noted that no story is ever told twice. With each telling details change, contours of the plot are exaggerated or forgotten, and voices of characters are intensified or subdued. This is not always a conscious or intentional process; rather it is an example of what Yiannis Gabriel calls *story work*, which “seeks to transcend the literal truth of events by drawing out a different type of truth, one that may claim to be deeper, more powerful, and more transcendental.”⁴¹ Gabriel notes there are various “poetic tropes” that storytellers use to convey

³⁸ See his *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). Originally published in 1983.

³⁹ Edited by Bruce Longenecker (Louisville: WJK, 2002). Longenecker’s introductory chapter is an especially well-done synopsis of the history of narrative investigation in Pauline studies.

⁴⁰ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Parts I-IV (Minneapolis: FP, 2013).

⁴¹ Gabriel, *Storytelling*, 35.

truth. They include attribution of motive, attribution of causality, attribution of emotion, and so forth. Most storytellers invoke poetic tropes instinctively, and the most effective tropes seem so natural they are rarely questioned by hearers. As stories “travel” – when they are retold in new contexts – poetic tropes sometimes become more conspicuous than intended. When this happens, tropes can be replaced or revised in order to better communicate a story’s truth, resulting in a story that seems to evolve over time. Sometimes, though, tropes don’t evolve, so as the story moves into new storytelling contexts, it develops factual “inconsistencies” modern readers find hard to swallow. But irregularities should not be seen as evidence that the story has somehow been corrupted over time. On the contrary, a story that evolves is a story powerful enough to convey meaning in multiple contexts.

The story about Paul’s conversion evolved as it circulated in early Christian communities. Though likely written after most of his own writings, the book of Acts records the most well-known version of Paul’s conversion. When Paul (alternatively called by his Semitic name Saul) first appears, he is an onlooker/participant at the stoning of Stephen (7:58). He is also seen actively persecuting the Church – “Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison” (8:3). But then chapter 9 records a sudden personal transformation or “conversion” as Paul journeyed along the road toward Damascus:

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (9:3-8)

This account is so commonly known it has become a trope in its own right: it is remembered as the official script of Paul’s conversion, and it has become the de facto template for understanding conversion in Christian imagination. However, this is only one of several versions

of the experience, and one of three in the book of Acts alone. With noticeable inconsistencies, chapters 22 and 26 also purport to record first-person accounts of the experience.

The discrepancies between the three versions in Acts have puzzled readers for centuries. Charles Hedrick, for instance, who was one of the first modern scholars to produce an in-depth analysis of the literary structure and style of the three accounts, concluded that Luke intended all three accounts to be read together to “supplement, complement and correct” each other.⁴² Ronald Witherup added that the repetition is an example of functional redundancy, a Lukan literary strategy that is “part of the purposeful characterization of Paul growing in stature as a witness to the gospel”.⁴³ Perhaps, as F.F. Bruce writes, this purposeful characterization culminated in his speech to Agrippa (chapter 26) which, “above all his other speeches in Acts, may worthily claim to be called his *Apologia pro via sua*”.⁴⁴ Or maybe Luke had less of an agenda than is typically assumed – after all, he has been shown to be meticulously faithful to his sources, so it is not unreasonable to conclude the different versions in Acts came directly from Luke’s sources.

However one understands the differences between these passages, most scholars generally agree that Luke had a specific literary or theological goal in mind when he knowingly included conflicting versions of the same story. Few agree on what those goals may have been, and even fewer agree on how determinative those goals may have been to the final shape of Acts. While space doesn’t allow for a full review of this particular debate, it is acknowledged to raise another point: the fact that Luke records three different versions is evidence that story work is taking place. That is to say, these stories each represent an attempt to make a point about Paul's character, mission, trustworthiness, and/or apostolic legitimacy. In fact, these accounts are part of a broader

⁴² Charles Hedrick, “Paul’s Conversion/Call: A Comparative Analysis of the Three Reports in Acts,” *JBL* 100 no.3 (1981): 432.

⁴³ Ronald Witherup, “Functional Redundancy in the Acts of the Apostles: A Case Study,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 48 (1992): 70.

⁴⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988): 461.

storytelling ecology within the early Christian movement that sought to make sense of experiences that otherwise may have been patently disorienting to Paul's contemporaries. To unpack this argument, this section must first review the theoretical differences between narrative and antenarrative before turning to Paul's own autobiographical conversion account in Galatians.

Some storytelling scholars have drawn a distinction between narrative and antenarrative. Narrative, on the one hand, is a retrospective sensemaking tool that imposes order on past events. It is a reified, official account of an experience, and it is generally not open to revision. An antenarrative, on the other hand, is a "fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and pre-narrative speculation, a bet that a proper narrative can be constituted."⁴⁵ As discussed in the previous chapter, an antenarrative is a story told in the midst of unfolding events before an interpretive frame has been developed, whereas a narrative assumes all such questions are settled and no longer open to debate. In fact, the most convincing narratives present themselves as natural or given, as if there could be no other possible way of understanding the meaning behind an event or experience. As antenarratives are told and retold, some are bundled up together and frozen, so to speak, into an official narrative. This is a process known as *reification*.

The multiple accounts of Paul's conversion give readers a sampling of the antenarratives in circulation during and immediately following Paul's life. Undoubtedly Paul's sudden transformation was a jarring and disorienting experience – likely as much to himself as it was to those who knew him. As disorienting as the experience was, Paul and his associates made multiple attempts to tell the story of what happened. But with each retelling, certain details were foregrounded and various poetic tropes were invoked to make sense of the event. These stories were told and retold, sometimes dovetailing with other versions, sometimes forgetting certain details, and sometimes coming into direct conflict with other versions of the same story. Eventually the version found in Acts 9 won the day to become a reified narrative of Paul's

⁴⁵ Boje, *Narrative Methods*, 1.

experience – a sharply-drawn sketch of profound transformation, a conversion in the truest sense of the word. This particular narrative has been taken up by generations of Christians ever since and has become for many Christians the normative mode of religious conversion.

But when compared with other versions – particularly Paul’s own autobiographical accounts – some of the details are incongruous. Take, for example, Paul’s own autobiographical statements in his letter to the Galatian church:

I received [the gospel] through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord’s brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, ‘The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they glorified God because of me. (1:12-24)

The most glaring discrepancies between Galatians and Acts 9 can be summarized as follows: 1)

Paul says here he “did not confer” with anyone after the conversion event, but immediately went into Arabia. Only later does he go on to Damascus. By contrast, according to Acts 9, Paul is blinded and must be led into Damascus where he is baptized by Ananias. 2) Galatians lacks any mention of Paul’s blindness or hearing voices from heaven – both significant events that would seemingly deserve mention. 3) In Galatians, Paul quickly connected his experience with his commission to proclaim Christ “among the Gentiles”, whereas in Acts 9:20 (not quoted above), Paul instead goes instead to the Jewish synagogues to preach. 4) In Galatians, Paul characterizes the event as a “call”, not necessarily a “conversion”, as it has traditionally been understood.⁴⁶ 5)

⁴⁶ Furthermore, this portion of Acts doesn’t mention a call “to” anything in particular either. Cousar explains this by seeing conversion and call as the same thing, or at least two sides of the same coin. See Charles Cousar, *Galatians* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982): 33ff.

Galatians also lacks any reference to Paul's baptism, which represented the climactic resolution of Paul's experience according to Acts 9.

Despite these discrepancies, Acts 9 and Galatians do not entirely discredit one another. There certainly are ways to harmonize the details without doing irrevocable harm to either story. For one thing, it is clear that his relationship with the Galatian church is strained, so Paul's autobiographical remarks may have been colored by his rhetorical goals. Beginning at least with John Chrysostom, commentators have read the autobiographical material in Galatians as an apologetic defense against those who disputed Paul's legitimacy.⁴⁷ Hans Dieter Betz even goes so far to say that *all* of Galatians is a defense of Paul's apostleship.⁴⁸ More recently, though, scholars have questioned how central the issue of apostleship really was in Paul's argument in Galatians. Beverly Gaventa, for instance reads Galatians in the context of other Greco-Roman autobiographies and concludes Paul was much more concerned with presenting his own life as a model for others to imitate.⁴⁹ And Nicholas Taylor has compellingly suggested that Paul deployed his autobiographical statements in order to distance himself from the Antiochene churches in the wake of an intense, unresolved conflict with their leadership (specifically Peter).⁵⁰

In any case, the point remains that the biographical details presented in Galatians should not be seen as irreconcilable with the account in Acts 9. Instead, these variations can be seen as examples of antenarrative. Though they provide different details and occasionally frame events differently, none are verifiably *untrue* – instead they each attempt to communicate profound

⁴⁷ B. R. Gaventa provides an extensive bibliography of the history of this interpretation. See her "Galatians 1 and 2: Autobiography as Paradigm," *Novum Testamentum XXVIII* no. 4 (1986): 310.

⁴⁸ *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: FP, 1979).

⁴⁹ Gaventa, "Autobiography as Paradigm," 309-326. Elizabeth Castelli later took a similar thesis and offered a helpful reading of the power dynamics at work in Paul's writings, especially where he explicitly called his readers to imitate his life. See her *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville: WJK, 1991).

⁵⁰ Nicholas Taylor, "Paul's Apostolic Legitimacy," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 83 (1993): 65-77.

meaning by organizing events based on the particular needs of the context of the storytelling performance.

This process is especially evident in biographical material in general. Biography is a form of fiction, but not in the sense that it is made up with the intent to obscure the factual nature of what actually happened. Rather, a biography is a particular arrangement of events, emotions, and characters that are woven together by poetic tropes in order to make meaning out of elements that may otherwise appear meaningless.⁵¹ Discussing autobiographical material, Ochs and Capps even go so far as to say that the “self” referenced in autobiographical work is nothing more than a product of selective narrative construal, and moreover, the self is constantly open to revision when confronted by other narratives.⁵² Decades earlier, Jerome Bruner noted that “life narratives obviously reflect the prevailing theories about ‘possible lives’ that are part of one’s culture”. That is, the way one organizes a biography is not *ad hoc* or arbitrary, but is modeled after “a stock of canonical life narratives (heroes, Marthas, tricksters, etc.)”. In other words, biographers build stories with a “cultural toolkit” of other stories already available in culture. Furthermore, this is a reflexive process – the stories told today become part of tomorrow’s cultural toolkit. In a real way then “we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives”.⁵³

When it comes to biographical stories about religious conversions or spiritual awakenings, there are even more considerations. Thomas DeGloma argues that (auto)biographical stories are a form of social memory that function as an internal control mechanism (group members are given elements of a cultural toolkit with which to construct and understand their own experiences) as

⁵¹ Like any story, an autobiography never includes *every* event, emotion and character. Oftentimes elements are filtered out or ignored because they don’t appear to be “relevant” to the story. But the very notion of relevancy is itself an artifact of story work – it is evidence that a storyteller has made choices along the way arranging story elements into a particular plotline that in turn make those elements meaningful.

⁵² Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, “Narrating the Self,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25 (October 1996): 16-43.

⁵³ Quotes in this paragraph taken from Jerome Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” *Social Research* 54 no. 1 (Spring 1987), Reprinted in *Social Research* 71 no. 3 (Fall 2004): 694.

well as a “mnemonic authority in the face of competition”.⁵⁴ For DeGloma, the power of a conversion story comes from its ability to sharply bifurcate the world – old vs. new, then vs. now, truth vs. lies, etc. Even the storyteller is split into two characters – a former self vs. an enlightened current self. The enlightened self overcomes the old self in order to “establish a unique epistemic, cognitive and moral footing – a socially founded right to be self-assured about their present system of beliefs because they have ‘seen the darkness’ and can therefore testify to the ‘false’ nature of the rejected worldview”. With this authority storytellers and their community can confidently oppose competing worldviews: “Communities, in turn, use and display awakening accounts to establish and defend their cognitive authority in the face of competition.” But the stance need not be understood as entirely defensive. These stories also provide an example for other potential converts to follow: “They provide autobiographical models that potential believers can use to ‘see the light’ and migrate to a particular community’s collective worldview”.

Though not writing explicitly about antenarrative and conversion autobiographies, Richard Pervo traces how early Christian communities began to reify the stories about Paul’s conversion into an official narrative that both made sense of Paul’s life as well as constructed a model for others to follow.⁵⁵ In particular, he notes how the presumably deutero-Pauline texts (such as 1 Timothy) present Paul in ways subtly different than how Paul presents himself in his undisputed letters. To the Philippian church, for instance, Paul writes:

[We] have no confidence in the flesh— even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to

⁵⁴ Thomas DeGloma, “Awakenings, Autobiography, Memory, and the Social Logic of Personal Discovery,” *Sociological Forum* 25 no. 3 (September 2010): 534. The quotes in the following paragraphs are all taken from page 534ff.

⁵⁵ Richard Pervo, *The Making of Paul: Constructions of the Apostle in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: FP, 2010). Pervo’s book extends beyond the canon of Scripture to follow the narrative trajectories into other early Christian texts, such as *The Acts of Paul* (circa 160 CE).

regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (3:3-8)

Although Paul here accounted his life as “rubbish” (3:9) in view of Christ’s work in his life, it is clear that Paul doesn’t have an entirely negative view of his past. He *could* boast about his accomplishments, were it not for Christ’s mercy, which he now values much more highly. Contrast this with the strong language the author uses about himself in 1 Timothy, likely a deutero-Pauline text written some time later by one of Paul’s followers:

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a *blasphemer*, a *persecutor*, and a *man of violence*. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save *sinners—of whom I am the foremost*. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. (1:12-17, emphasis added)

Pervo notes that, of the negative terms highlighted in the 1 Timothy passage, only “persecutor” was used by Paul to describe himself. The other terms stylize Paul as a prototypical sinner, the direct antithesis of what an idealized apostle is supposed to be like. The text thus constructs a version of Paul and holds it up for other Christians to imitate, though this version of Paul may not correspond entirely with Paul's own self-understanding. This process makes sense, however, when understood in light of the research about conversion (auto)biographies – the stark language in 1 Timothy is an artifact of story work that bifurcates the world into good and bad, past and present, darkness and light. Paul is split into two persons – a sinner and a saint – and the latter has superseded the former. The pathway for others to follow then is clear – leave behind the old and incorporate into Christ. “Paul is the prototypical sinner and therefore the model convert.”⁵⁶

That last word – “convert” – also demands scrutiny. Traditionally, Paul’s experience has been understood as a true religious conversion, meaning Paul left Judaism in a decisive break and converted to Christianity. Recently, however, this reading has been challenged. Krister Stendahl

⁵⁶ Pervo, *Making of Paul*, 15.

was among the first to argue that Christianity did not yet exist as a discrete religion per se, and thus Paul could not convert in the classical sense.⁵⁷ Since Stendahl, this question has become a hotly contested issue in Pauline studies. While some scholars such as Ben Witherington on the other hand point to the dramatic transformation and reorientation that Paul underwent and argue that it “is impossible to not speak of conversion”, other scholars such as Calvin Roetzel on the other hand contend that “Paul was born a Jew, lived as a Jew and in all likelihood died a Jew.”⁵⁸ Without rehashing the debate, it seems Paul’s experience is best understood in terms of an intra-religious transformation, and that Paul continued to see himself as a Jew throughout his life. But this is said only to make a different point: the reason the ‘conversion school’ of thought has held on so strongly is precisely because conversion is largely a narrative construction. A story about a subtle, indescribable, interior spiritual experience is hardly an engaging story at all. But the Acts 9 version best met the narrative needs of the early Christian communities because it employed a robust plot, vivid imagery, and relatable characters while using appropriate poetic tropes to demonstrate that God was indeed active in the world. Narrative took an experience that would otherwise be impossible for others to understand and packaged it in a way that could be communicable across time and space.

This gets at the heart of what lies behind the proliferation of Paul’s conversion stories in the early Christian communities. Story work, especially biography-based story work, in Christian tradition is a kind of evangelism, a way to invite others to see the world in a particular way – namely, as the realm of Christ’s lordship. “When Christians say ‘I was,’ we’re acknowledging more than where we’ve been; we’re remembering what God has done for us and in us through

⁵⁷ See Stendahl’s “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 199-215. Many of his ideas were later fleshed out in *Paul Among the Jews and Gentiles - And Other Essays* (Philadelphia: FP, 1976).

⁵⁸ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998): 304. Calvin Roetzel, *Paul: The Man and the Myth* (Minneapolis: FP, 1999): 46.

Christ.”⁵⁹ More pointedly, (auto)biography is a tactic in the Church’s cultural toolkit employed not only to instruct others how to live, but also to help others understand personal spiritual experiences – which may be as confusing or disorienting as Paul’s own encounter with the risen Christ. Yet a real danger lies in allowing one story to monopolize a community’s attention, to become so reified that hearers forget an encounter with God is above all a mysterious, ineffable experience that *should* spill out of narrative and linguistic categories. No narrative is robust enough to communicate the fullness of God’s activity in the world, and reliance on one official narrative version may very well prevent other perspectives from being heard. Thus the various stories about Paul’s conversion should be read in tandem with one another, allowing their discrepancies to stand in tension with one another in order that the community can be knit together into a diverse narrative tapestry.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has shown that stories are indeed used throughout Scripture to lead others – to induce change, inspire action, and promote certain values. Nathan used a story to effect significant social change by speaking truth to power. He used a story to draw out meanings that the king would have preferred to ignore. Similarly, Jesus used stories to form group identity and teach his followers how to live. His stories gave them tools to read the world differently and made the presence of God indelibly real among them. Finally, the stories told by and about Paul demonstrate how antenarrative is used to make sense of ineffable spiritual transformation. Paul’s conversion stories also provided a model that other converts could imitate.

These examples of storytelling in Scripture norm the understanding of storytelling practice in the contemporary Church. In each case examined above, stories behave like constructive agents – they are more than mere containers that carry meaning or reflect preexisting values. Nathan’s

⁵⁹ Scott McClellan, *Tell Me a Story: Finding God (and Ourselves) Through Narrative* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013): 43.

story, Jesus' parables and Paul's (auto)biographical stories all *do* things defining reality, aligning social configurations, refining identities and assigning meanings. Thus there is merit in acknowledging the formative nature of stories in the Church today.

This argument is quite traditional, in fact. Christian orthodoxy has long affirmed that Biblical stories are "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until [they] divide soul from spirit, joints from marrow; [they are] able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). Christian preaching and evangelism presume that the words, stories, and broader redemption narratives in Scripture have a degree of creative agency to transform human hearts. Scripture clearly *does* things: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16).⁶⁰

But a story's creative agency is not entirely a consequence of its divine inspiration. The previous chapter presented substantial evidence that stories produce and reproduce organizational reality in purely secular contexts. The story of Lucile confronting IBM CEO Tom Watson, Jr., for instance, did not presume to be inspired by anyone – yet this story was shown to have enormous impact on the social dynamics of the organization. So while contemporary stories cannot claim to be inspired in the same way canonical stories are, they can do things nonetheless.

As organizational stories created by and for the local church, OVTs should likewise be seen as creative agents. It is not a stretch to say that OVTs help *form* the local church; they do not merely reveal what the church "is like", but also shape what the church is becoming. Perhaps OVTs can operate much the same way the Pauline conversion stories do – they represent a narrative understanding of a significant life event, and they provide a model for others to emulate.

⁶⁰ Scripture is "inspired by God" as 2 Tim suggests. One could argue that the Bible's agency comes from this divine "inspiration" more so than from anything inherent in the text itself, thus making the stories in Scripture little more than inert "containers" of the Holy Spirit. However, the question of agency needn't be reduced to an either/or solution. Certainly the text of Scripture is inspired by God, but this need not override the text's own agency. In the same way human free will exists in dynamic relationship with divine will (at least according to most theological traditions), the inherent capabilities of stories are not voided by the Spirit's work.

Take an OVT about parents grappling with the death of a child, for instance. Such an experience would be devastating for any parent, and would surely raise tough questions in their minds about theodicy and the nature of suffering. Many Christians would feel guilty for questioning God about such weighty matters, but an OVT depicting parents facing a similar situation can literally instruct others how to grieve. An OVT can provide comfort to other couples, too, because they demonstrate that their emotions are not unique; even in the toughest of times, there is hope that they too will learn how to live with such an indescribable loss.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT DESIGN: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The previous chapters argued that stories can act like leaders, even doing some of the same things that flesh and blood leaders do. According to the literature in the organizational communication and organizational storytelling fields, narratives define organizational reality, align relationships, refine personal and organizational identities, and assign meanings within organizational culture. Furthermore, it was shown that stories performed these functions within the pages of Scripture, namely in Nathan's confrontation with King David, in Jesus' parables, and in the various ways Paul's conversion was recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Epistles.

In order to expand this argument, this thesis-project turned to Online Video Testimonies (or OVTs) to see how they too are narratives that act like leaders within their respective organizations. Since OVTs are a new phenomenon that have received little attention from scholars, great care was taken in selecting a research design. On one hand, a purely quantitative study would certainly produce interesting results about OVTs, but it would fail to broaden an understanding of how and why they are used. On the other hand, a purely qualitative study would help answer these broad questions, but it would be difficult to assess the validity of such findings without contextual grounding in quantitative data. Both types of analysis are necessary for developing a well-rounded understanding of OVTs.

With this in mind, it was determined that a mixed-methods research design would best meet the goals of this research. Accordingly, this thesis-project was divided into two broad research phases. The first phase was aimed at capturing quantitative data about OVT usage patterns in large evangelical churches. This phase conducted content analysis on a sample of OVTs drawn from the largest and most influential evangelical churches in the United States. The

second research phase collected qualitative data about the goals and motivations behind OVTs. This phase was organized as a multiple case study model and relied primarily on site visits and interviews with church leaders responsible for the production and distribution of OVTs. The following section more fully explains each of these research phases.

Research Phase One: The Quantitative Data

The first research phase analyzed OVTs from the 100 largest churches in the United States (as identified by Outreach Magazine).¹ This data set was chosen for several reasons. First, the sample was sized appropriately – it was small enough to be manageable, yet large enough to yield trustworthy data. Secondly, it was assumed that data collection would be most efficient in large churches because they presumably have sizeable communication/media budgets to pay for video equipment and production staff. Thirdly, many of these churches are widely recognized as trendsetters for the rest of evangelical Christianity because they have spearheaded many of today's most popular ministry approaches like modern worship music, multi-site ministry, and internet-based outreach. On a similar note, these churches frequently host seminars and workshops to share their ministry practices with other churches around the country, which suggests that basic OVT usage patterns in these churches should be at least partly generalizable to other churches.²

The first step in this data collection process involved identifying which churches use OVTs. This was accomplished by systematically observing channels of online content, or

¹ "Outreach 100", Outreach Magazine, accessed 23 March 2015, <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/2014-outreach-100/2014-Outreach-100-List.pdf>.

² Although ministry practices are often mimicked by smaller churches, this data set is admittedly not representative of all churches, or even all evangelical churches. For reasons noted below, one would expect OVTs to occur in these churches at a much higher rate compared to other churches. Thus it follows that the findings cannot necessarily be used to estimate OVT usage trends in smaller churches. On the contrary, this study focused exclusively on large evangelical churches because they provided fertile ground for capturing quantitative data about the videos themselves. Future research will be necessary to understand how congruent (or not) OVT usage patterns in small churches are with larger evangelical churches.

“streams”, to document evidence of OVTs in each church.³ Three streams were selected for observation: 1) the church’s website, 2) the church’s official Facebook page, and, if they existed, 3) the church’s channels on YouTube and Vimeo.

Rationale behind the choice of these streams is as follows. First, the church website is widely recognized as the de facto communication hub in large evangelical churches. Church websites have important internal and external functions, and they increasingly use video clips (of sermons, advertisements, OVTs and so on) to perform these tasks. It has even become commonplace to refer to the website as the church’s ‘new front door’ since it provides first impressions about the church’s culture and encourages potential visitors to attend worship.⁴ Moreover, the website is the “home base” for all content a church shares online: they provide links to other online content and help existing members find new ways to plug into the life of the church.⁵

Secondly, Facebook was chosen because it is commonly understood as the cornerstone of a church’s social media strategy due to its widespread use and range of communicative capabilities. Facebook claims to have had over one billion daily active users in September of 2015, and all 100 of the churches studied were found to actively maintain a Facebook page with at least

³ “Streams” is language borrowed from David Bourgeois, who argues that all Internet users consume streams of content every day by using their digital devices such as mobile phones, e-readers, computers, etc. Bourgeois doesn’t include the church website in his list of streams, however – in fact a core argument of his book is that churches need to think beyond church websites to be successful in the new media age. See his *Ministry in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013), 26-33.

⁴ Even mainline denominations have picked up this language. The United Methodist Church offers a seminar on “Your Church Website: Rethinking Your New Front Door” and the Presbyterian Church (USA) suggests that “websites can explain to visitors what to expect” before they visit in person. See “Your Church Website: Rethinking Your New Front Door,” United Methodist Communications, accessed 23 December 2015, <http://www.umcom.org/learn/your-church-website-rethinking-your-new-front-door> and Mike Ferguson, “Your Church’s Front Door,” PCUSA, accessed 23 December 2015, <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2012/7/27/your-churchs-front-door/>.

⁵ Jeremy Smith, *By the Numbers: A Longitudinal Study of on the Digital Ministry of America’s Largest Churches* (ChurchMag Press, 2015), chap. 3, Kindle.

one thousand “Likes”.⁶ In terms of communicative capabilities, Facebook is far more comprehensive than many other social media platforms. Facebook allows users to share a wide array of data with one another such as text, video, images, and geo-location information, whereas other social media platforms are much more limited. Twitter, for instance, limits the number of characters that can be shared at one time. Instagram is primarily a photo-sharing site, though it recently began allowing uploads of short video clips. And LinkedIn has struggled to expand beyond its core functionality as a job-seeking and networking service.

Thirdly, YouTube and Vimeo were chosen because they are widely recognized as the most reliable and popular services for hosting video content on the Internet.⁷ Technologically speaking, video files can be very large, and delivering them is an expensive task in terms of server processing power and bandwidth. By the same token, the sheer number of codecs and video formats in use today makes it exceedingly difficult to reliably serve video content to all browsers, mobile phones, and Internet-connected devices. But YouTube and Vimeo have proven to be remarkably dependable solutions for delivering video content to a wide variety of devices. Furthermore, YouTube and Vimeo are among the most widely recognized video streaming services on the Internet today. YouTube is a household name for most users, often serving as an eponym for any web-based video service, while Vimeo is a favorite of film producers and online marketers alike for its customizability and “professionalism”.⁸ Churches are no different in this

⁶ Facebook user statistics are available on their site at “Company Info”, Facebook, accessed 8 November 2015, <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>.

⁷ According to Internet informatics company Alexa, YouTube is the fourth most-visited website in the United States, while Vimeo ranks #142 in the United States for overall traffic. See “The top 500 sites on the web,” Alexa, accessed 23 October 2015, <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>. Also noteworthy, Facebook is ranked #2 in terms of overall US traffic.

⁸ “Tale of the Tape: YouTube vs. Vimeo,” *SocialTimes* (blog), AdWeek, Feb 4, 2015, <http://www.adweek.com/socialtimes/tale-of-the-tape-youtube-vs-vimeo>.

respect – the vast majority of congregations who share video on the Internet were found to use YouTube or Vimeo, and in some cases, both.⁹

Taken together, these three streams – the church website, Facebook, and YouTube//Vimeo – virtually exhaust the viable options for hosting video content on the Internet. That is to say, it is exceedingly difficult to communicate with video on the Internet *without* using one of these three channels. Thus it was assumed that, if a church was using OVTs as part of its communication strategy, evidence should have been found in at least one of these three streams.¹⁰

To tabulate the occurrence of OVTs, the researcher personally examined these three online streams for each church. First, the website was loaded, and a cursory review of the site menu structure was made. OVTs were often found under the headings “Stories”, “Testimonies”, or “Media”. The on-site search capabilities were also used to locate OVTs by searching for terms such as “stories” and “testimonies”. Next, the researcher loaded the church’s Facebook page to scan for OVTs. If none were found under the “Videos” section, the timeline was scanned for OVTs shared by the church within the past 12 months.¹¹ Thirdly, the researcher determined if the church maintained an account on YouTube, Vimeo, or both. This determination was typically made by looking for links on the church website and by searching for the churches by name on the YouTube and Vimeo websites. For each service (YouTube and Vimeo) the researcher browsed

⁹ As a technical aside, although a video sometimes appears to be part of an individual church website, it is almost always delivered “behind the scenes” by a streaming service like YouTube or Vimeo. These services make it easy for webmasters to seamlessly embed video on a website to the extent that a user cannot tell that the clip is actually being played, or *served*, from another website. By doing so, the expensive, complex task of video encoding and delivery is turned over to servers especially designed for video playback.

¹⁰ This assumption was confirmed by data drawn from the questionnaire distributed at a later stage in the research process (see below). 100% of respondents indicated that their church uses YouTube and/or Vimeo to share online video content, while all but 2 respondents (91%) use their church’s website to share video. All respondents also indicated their church maintains an account on Facebook.

¹¹ Twelve months is an admittedly arbitrary limitation. However it is a necessary parameter, as many churches post content multiple times per day on Facebook. Attempting to scan through several years of content on some Facebook profiles would have taken an inordinate amount of time.

collections and playlists set up by the church for evidence of OVTs. Additionally, the on-site search functions were used to locate OVTs associated with each church.

Whenever an OVT was found, the researcher made an effort to capture a unique URL for each video in order to return to it in the future. In cases where capturing a unique URL was not possible, instructions for retrieving specific OVTs were noted in the research log.

It was discovered that churches often published the same OVTs in multiple streams – that is, an OVT that appears on a church website may also appear on Vimeo and Facebook, for example. Since the goal of this initial research phase was simply to quantify how many churches are using OVTs, the methodological decision was made to code OVTs as a simple yes/no for each communication stream. In other words, there was no attempt made to track unique OVTs by communication stream, or to determine where an OVT first appeared.

Developing a Working Definition

During this phase of research, it became necessary to refine the working definition of an OVT. In order to qualify as an OVT, it was determined that a video should meet the following criteria. First, the video should be published in a church communication stream by the church itself – that is, if an OVT appears on Facebook, it must be posted by the church's official Facebook account, not by another user.

Secondly, the video should be roughly between three and six minutes in length, though these were not strict guidelines. A handful of the OVTs in the sample were longer than ten minutes, often resembling a short film. Other videos were considerably shorter than three minutes, a few only one minute long.

Thirdly, the primary subject of the video should be an individual, a couple, or a family associated with the local church. The subject should be the primary speaker who recounts a significant incident or period of growth in his or her life and then draws out the lessons or morals they have learned. The structure of the narrative should be easily recognizable, and involve

foreshadowing/introduction of a problem, a sequential ordering of events depicting how the subject met and overcame the problem, a sense of closure or denouement, and a reflective portion that pronounces or infers meaning.¹² The primary subject's own words are frequently used in combination with titles (text overlays), news footage, and clips from the church's own worship services to drive the story.

Fourthly, OVTs should mainly be "about" the primary subject. Often a particular ministry, such as a small group ministry, plays a pivotal role in the development of the storyline, and that ministry's logo or website may appear prominently in the video. But the OVT is ultimately framed as "so-and-so's experience" with that ministry, not as a direct advertisement for the ministry itself.¹³

Finally, a certain degree of intentionality should be apparent in an OVT. An OVT does not belong to the "candid camera" genre that catches subjects going about their everyday lives without knowledge or consent to appear in a video. Instead, subjects break through the "fourth wall" to directly address the audience. OVTs usually include voiceovers and "talking heads", which are close shots of a subject describing and interpreting events directly to the camera. Frequently, the *mise-en-scène* makes it obvious that OVTs are intentionally produced by utilizing professional cinematographic techniques like splicing together multiple camera angles, playing spoken dialogue over a music bed that modulates based on the mood of the story, and animated text effects that complement the primary storyteller's speech.¹⁴ Sometimes less-desirable artifacts of the production process are evident in OVTs, even to a casual viewer. For instance, clips that cut off a speaker mid-sentence make it obvious that the overall shape of the video has been edited.

¹² See Larry Browning and G. H. Morris, *Stories of Life in the Workplace: An Open Architecture for Organizational Narratology* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 32.

¹³ Video 93 only partially satisfied this criterion. It opened with a voiceover reading a letter written by a church visitor, but then transitioned into a "commercial" for the church's upcoming Harvest Festival.

¹⁴ Video 40 notably did not utilize any of these elements. It consisted only of a single-shot "talking head" depicting a man describing how God helped him overcome cancer.

Furthermore, on a narrative level, an OVT is depicted as a storyteller's intentional construal of events and experience that he or she expects to be heard and digested by other listeners. It is a self-conscious activity wherein the storyteller purposefully engages in a storytelling performance for the benefit of others.

Transcription and Content Analysis

After determining which churches in the sample used OVTs, the researcher then randomly selected individual OVTs from these churches to be transcribed and subjected to content analysis.¹⁵ Every church (where evidence of OVTs was found) had at least one OVT transcribed, while some churches had as many as five videos transcribed. Videos were selected from each of the three communication streams (although it was impossible to control for equal ratios between streams since videos often appeared in multiple streams). Transcription was largely orthographic since the stresses, pauses, and other phonetic language traits were deemed superfluous for the stated research goals. But discourse markers such as “you know”, “uh”, and “I mean” were transcribed and contributed to the overall word count for each video. Additionally, the transcripts included any text that appeared on screen, as well as any visual elements that were deemed integral to the flow of the video. These elements, however, were bracketed in the final transcripts so they did not factor into the overall word count. Transcription was completed using Google Docs and an open source tool found at oTranscribe.com. Transcripts were subsequently entered into a custom database application developed by the researcher, which allowed for granular control over the way transcripts were searched, sorted, and coded.¹⁶

¹⁵ Since the same OVT often appeared in 2 or more streams, it was impossible to ensure this step was statistically “random” – i.e. there was not a fixed ratio of website OVTs versus YouTube/Vimeo OVTs, for example. The OVT URLs recorded during this portion of the research were often from YouTube or Vimeo, although they videos also appeared on church websites. This was done for convenience's sake, as it is easier to link directly the video itself when it appears on YouTube and Vimeo.

¹⁶ This database system was powered by a SQL and PHP backend and later analyzed with the R programming language and a very basic HTML/CSS front end. Details are available by contacting the researcher.

Once transcription was complete, a content analysis was performed on the transcripts that focused on several aspects of the OVTs. First, general structural characteristics were recorded, such as the number of subjects (or speakers) in each video, the duration of each video, and the word count for each video. Secondly, videos were analyzed for 28 other common elements, or tropes. Each trope was translated into a code, or “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data.”¹⁷ These codes were largely etic, meaning they were drawn from the content of the videos themselves. The codes were then grouped into categories that corresponded to the four functions of stories discussed in chapter 2 (define, align, refine, and assign). A chart detailing the coding scheme, including examples, may be found in appendix A.

Speech recorded in OVTs routinely included ellipses, run-on sentences, hedges, starts and stops, fillers, and other discourse markers. Thus the basic unit of measurement for this portion of analysis was limited to broad idea or theme. Smaller units (such as word or sentence) proved to be too fine because the spoken language presented in OVTs was unscripted, informal, and highly conversational in nature. This methodological decision was most notable in the case of coding for Scriptural references. Sometimes the OVT presented direct Scriptural quotations that were quite easy to identify at the sentence or fragment level. More often, however, the speaker made general biblical allusions (i.e. not direct quotations) but the intent was made clear by the narrative context.

It should also be noted that this content analysis accounted for multiple channels of data. It not only analyzed transcriptions of spoken dialogue, but it also included visual data (such as the appearance of a church logo) and audio data (such as worship music and preaching). Although major visual and audio elements were recorded directly in the transcripts, the researcher personally watched each OVT a minimum of three times to ensure all relevant data was captured and noted in research logs.

¹⁷ Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2012), 3.

Data collection began for this research phase in August of 2015 and continued through December. In total, 102 OVTs were personally transcribed by the researcher, totaling nearly seven hours of footage. In real-time, the process lasted well over 30 hours of transcribing and organizing OVT texts. While the process was slow, it lent the researcher a great deal of familiarity with the texts, which was greatly beneficial in later stages of research. The researcher also maintained a research log to annotate the process of data collection and analysis.

Bridge Phase: The Online Survey

As a way to bridge the two broad research phases, the researcher set up a simple, single-page website to deliver an online questionnaire to church communication professionals and other church leaders.¹⁸ The purpose of this questionnaire was to gather data about how OVTs are produced in “real world” church applications. For instance, it asked which members of church leadership are involved in OVT production and it also sought to understand how prominently OVTs function within the church’s overall communication strategy. After development and testing, this questionnaire was disseminated via email to all 100 churches reviewed in the first research phase. It was also disseminated via social media and direct email contacts with church communication professionals and other church leaders in the United States. The researcher also leveraged personal contacts with church communication leaders to disseminate the questionnaire.

Research Phase Two: The Qualitative Data

To organize qualitative data about the production and distribution of OVTs, it was determined that a multiple case study model best helped the researcher “gain an in-depth

¹⁸ This questionnaire was available at www.ovts.org between August and November 2015. The actual questionnaire was created in Google Forms, but a reproduction is available in Appendix B.

understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved”.¹⁹ Following Creswell, a case study approach allows an investigator to explore “a bounded system or multiple bounded systems over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes.”²⁰ The ‘bounded system’ in this research was limited to activities related to the production and distribution of OVTs.

From the sample of churches used in the first research phase, seven churches were selected as discrete case study sites.²¹ The results of the questionnaire assisted the researcher in selecting these churches. Preference was given to churches that had produced OVTs in the past year. Similarly, the researcher attempted to select sites where the primary survey respondent held a variety of job functions – video producers, creative directors, communication directors, pastoral roles, etc. This ensured that a wide variety of perspectives on the OVT production process were considered. Ultimately, however, the most significant factor in the selection of case study sites was practicality. Negotiating access into churches to gather data was a formidable task since many churches in the dataset have large staff hierarchies and the various job functions related to the production of OVTs are spread across several full-time and part-time employees. Furthermore, geographical limitations made it difficult to visit some of the research sites in person. In these cases, various kinds of data provided the base for analysis. Yin recommends several types of data that should be collected for use in case studies, including documents, archival records, interviews,

¹⁹ Sharan Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 19.

²⁰ John Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 2nd ed, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), 73.

²¹ Following Miles and colleagues, the term “sites” is preferred here, since “a case always occurs in a specified social and physical setting”. See Matthew Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 3rd ed, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013), 30.

direct observation, participant observation and physical artifacts.²² Much of this data was collected remotely via Internet, email, and telephone.

In particular, interviews were a primary mode of data collection. Beginning in January of 2016, the researcher contacted informants at more than one dozen churches. Several declined to be interviewed, usually citing time constraints, while others did not respond to repeated interview requests. Eventually six informants from five different churches agreed to participate. One interview took place in person, three interviews were conducted via telephone, and two took place via email. To prepare for each interview, the researcher reviewed as much material about the local church as possible. Mostly this involved information gathered from the church website, social media channels, and by watching OVTs. In one case, the researcher downloaded a smartphone app that had been developed by that specific church. Before speaking with informants, the researcher secured a signed copy of an informed consent document and provided materials that explained the research process, as well as basic information about OVTs. Additionally, the researcher elected to share a list of interview questions with informants via email. This was done to maximize interview time, and in two cases, this was specifically requested by informants. Sharing questions in advance made informants more comfortable with the interview process and it helped prepare them to answer specific questions about their production process. Since these interviews were intentionally semi-structured, the researcher clearly indicated that the questions shared prior to the interview were “sample questions” intended to help guide the discussion.

All respondents agreeing to telephone interviews gave explicit permission to record their interview. The researcher began each interview with a brief overview of the research process and invited the informant to ask any questions he or she had about the research. During the interviews, the researcher posed questions “conversationally” (i.e. the questions were not read verbatim from the list of prepared questions). Since the research goals behind these interviews focused on

²² Robert Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 5th ed, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013).

gathering rich data from each local church context by understanding their motivations, practices, and worldview, using wooden, inflexible language would have been counterproductive to the research process. Following each interview, the researcher transcribed the recording with the help of notes taken during the interview.

The researcher also collected other types of data in an effort to flesh out a full case study for each local church. When possible, the researcher personally visited churches to collect data via participant observation. In all, the researcher attended a worship service at four of the seven churches. Furthermore, the OVTs themselves comprised significant sources of useful data in each church.

Data from each case study site was compiled and subjected to thorough within-case analysis in order to draw preliminary conclusions about the function of OVTs within each church. Following this step, findings from each case were used to conduct cross-case analysis to compare, contrast, and triangulate the themes surrounding the use of OVTs in general. In-case and cross-case analysis borrowed tools from various strands of narrative research, including traditional forms of narrative analysis, and post-modern narrative methods. These tools assisted the formulation of a list of best-practices, which is shared in chapter 6.

Throughout the research process the researcher maintained extensive documentation, including a textual database of transcribed and coded texts, field notes, and an audit trail. Since much of the data collected in this project was downloaded from the Internet, the researcher attempted to archive permanent copies of much of the relevant data (such as videos) in order to ensure that future researchers can verify the findings of this study.

Chapter Summary

Because this research was exploratory – it is among the first studies known to focus on OVTs – it admittedly sacrifices simplicity for the sake of rich, variegated data. As stated earlier, the research goals involve developing a baseline understanding of the OVT phenomenon in local churches. Thus this research design is intended to meet these goals in a way that can provide a trustworthy foundation for a variety of future research projects.

CHAPTER 5

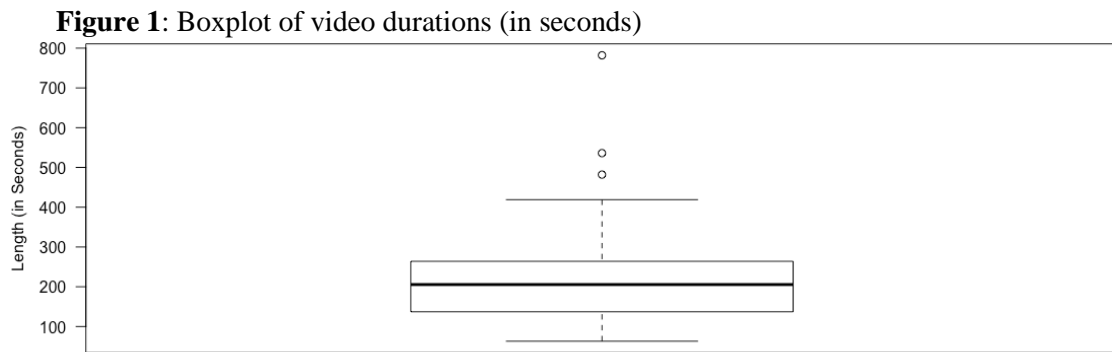
PROJECT FINDINGS: THE DATA

Research Phase One: The Quantitative Data

Evidence of Online Video Testimonies (OVTs) was found in 64 of the 100 largest churches in the United States (as identified by Outreach Magazine)¹. From these churches, 102 OVTs were randomly selected for further analysis. At least one OVT from each church was selected, while some churches had as many as five OVTs selected. For each video, three structural dimensions were recorded: duration, word count, and number of subjects appearing in the video. Additionally, the church size (weekly attendance) and the year founded were also recorded from the data provided by Outreach Magazine. Measures of central tendency and other descriptive statistics were then calculated for each of these five measures.

Duration. The mean duration of all 102 OVTs was 3 minutes and 41 seconds (written as 3:41). However, this measure of central tendency was somewhat misleading since the standard deviation of OVT duration was calculated to be a lengthy 1:46. Further analysis revealed, in fact, a wide range of video durations. Figure 1 shows a boxplot diagram representing the durations of all OVTs in the sample. The shortest OVT lasted only 1:03, while the longest OVT clocked in at 13:02. The middle two quartiles are bounded by the approximate values of 140 seconds (2:20) and 264 seconds (4:24), meaning that about half of the videos in the sample had durations that fell between these two values. Interestingly, two of the three extreme values at the top end of the diagram came from the same church (#53).

¹ “Outreach 100”, Outreach Magazine, accessed 23 March 2015, <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/2014-outreach-100/2014-Outreach-100-List.pdf>.



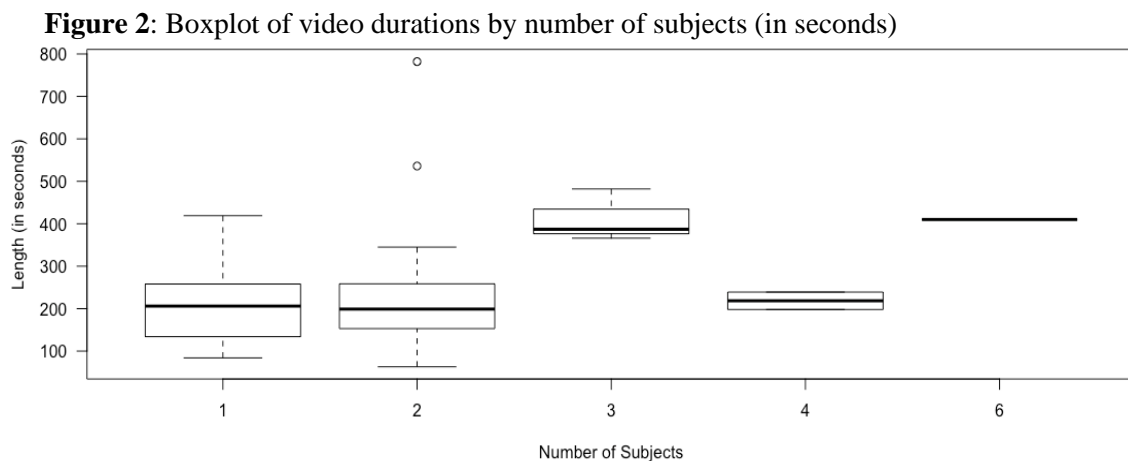
Word Count. The mean word count for the overall data set was 569 words with a standard deviation of 230 words. It was assumed that OVT duration would exhibit a strong positive relationship with word count. To confirm this suspicion, the Pearson coefficient of correlation for these two variables was calculated. The resulting value of 0.77 confirmed that longer videos tended to correlate with a higher word count. Moreover, the smallest word count value (184 words) was observed in video #55, which was the second shortest video in terms of duration. Similarly, the highest word count value (1,246 words) was observed in video #67, which was in the 93rd percentile in terms of duration.

Table 3: Number of subjects appearing in OVTs

Number of Subjects	Total OVTs (n)	Total OVTs (%)
1	69	67.6%
2	27	26.5%
3	3	2.9%
4	2	2.0%
6	1	1.0%

Number of Subjects. An overwhelming 94% of videos depicted one or two subjects (or speakers), while nearly 70% depicted just one subject. Only one video depicted more than 4 subjects (#109 depicted six). Table 3 displays the distribution of number of subjects. Initially there appeared to be a strong relationship between video duration and number of subjects appearing in a video. For instance, OVTs with more than two subjects were considerably longer than OVTs with

two or fewer (mean durations of 5:47 versus 3:33, respectively). Moreover, videos shorter than the mean duration overwhelmingly depicted 2 or fewer subjects (50 out of 51), while videos longer than the mean duration were more likely to depict three or more subjects (46 out of 51 OVTs). A simple Pearson correlation test was not applicable in this case, since the number of speakers is a nominal variable. But a boxplot of OVT durations broken out by number of speakers (see Figure 2) cast doubt on the assumption that there was a simple linear relationship between video duration and number of speakers. In fact, the diagram reveals that the mean duration of videos with two subjects was slightly lower than the mean duration of videos with only one subject.



Word count and number of subjects exhibited a similarly complex relationship. As noted above, the mean word count for entire dataset was 569, but among videos with more than two speakers, the mean word count jumped 62% to 917. For OVTs with two or fewer subjects, the word count is much closer to the overall mean at 547. In ‘shorter’ videos (those with a duration shorter than the overall mean) the word count was 404, while in ‘longer’ videos the mean word count was 734. However, by examining the variance between the word count means broken down by number of speakers (not shown), it became clear that the two variables also were not related in a straightforward manner.

Church Size and Year Founded. Church size and year founded were used to disaggregate the results to see if any significant differences existed between subsets of the data. The means for these two measures were 11,430 and 1973, respectively. But in order to produce subgroups of roughly the same size, medians were used as the breakpoints instead of their means. As such, OVTs were divided into two subsets based on the median year founded: 54 videos came from churches founded in or before 1981 and 48 came from churches founded after 1981. Similarly, OVTs were divided into two subsets based on median church attendance: 52 videos came from churches with a weekly attendance of 8,515 people or fewer, and 50 videos came from churches with a weekly attendance greater than 8,515.² Initially it appeared that OVTs in larger churches tended to be shorter and use fewer speakers. A series of t-tests, however, failed to demonstrate these results were not due to sampling error. Detailed results are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4: Disaggregate of OVT structural elements

	Mean Duration	Mean Word Count	% < 3 subjects	Total (n)
Year founded ≤ 1981	3:35	553	92.6%	54
Year founded > 1981	3:58	587	95.8%	48
Church size ≤ 8,515	3:55	578	88.5%	52
Church size > 8,515	3:16	559	100.0%	50
All Videos	3:41	569	94.1%	102

The next step in this phase of research coded for 28 tropes commonly found in OVTs.³ For the 102 OVTs in the dataset, a total of 556 tropes were recorded (a rate of roughly 5.4 tropes per video). Every video was coded for at least one trope, while one OVT contained as many as 11 tropes. Nearly two thirds of all OVTs invoked between 3 and 6 tropes. Tropes were counted only once per video; that is, if the subject verbalized the name of the church multiple times (C18), it was only coded once. Trope C8 (“Is church program or ministry seen or mentioned?”) appeared

² Subgroups were not exactly the same size because multiple videos came from churches that were founded in 1981; similarly multiple videos came from churches with a reported attendance of 8,515.

³ A chart detailing the coding scheme, including examples, may be found in appendix A

most frequently – in exactly half of the OVTs in the sample (51 videos) – while trope C10 (“Does the subject exhort the congregation?”) appeared least frequently, in only 5 videos. A full summary of trope counts is presented in Table 5.

Tropes were somewhat evenly distributed among the four categories (Define, Align, Refine, Assign). Refine was the most common category, as 34% of all tropes fell into this category. As a corollary, over 82% of OVTs in the sample invoked the Refine category, while less than 68% used codes in the Define category. A summary of category totals is presented in Table 6.

Table 5: Content Analysis Results

	Category	Total Videos
(C8): Is church program or ministry seen or mentioned?	Align	51
(C18): Does the subject say the name of the church?	Refine	46
(C4): Does any part of church or worship service appear?	Refine	43
(C26): Illicit lifestyle (drugs, alcohol, homosexuality, etc)?	Assign	31
(C5): Has the subject attended this church for a while?	Refine	29
(C25): Subject uses language about God's purpose, plan or will	Define	29
(C20): Discrete moment when s/he crossed line of faith?	Refine	27
(C12): Is Bible read, quoted or paraphrased	Assign	27
(C21): Supernatural understanding of life event?	Define	25
(C15): Does subject hear God?	Define	23
(C16): Does church logo appear?	Refine	23
(C32): Care and healing from others in the congregation?	Assign	21
(C2): Does (senior or other prominent) pastor appear?	Align	18
(C3): Is (senior or other prominent) pastor mentioned?	Align	17
(C30): Another church or ministry experience?	Align	15
(C13): Does Bible physically appear?	Assign	14
(C17): Does church website or hashtag appear?	Refine	14
(C28): Footage of foreign mission trip or local service project?	Assign	13
(C31): Experts such as doctors shown to be wrong?	Define	13
(C23): Metaphor or simile to describe life, event or situation	Define	12
(C29): Does subject talk about heaven, hell or eternity?	Define	12
(C11): Does subject exhort seekers or visitors or general viewer?	Align	11
(C22): Is the word tithing said or seen?	Align	9
(C9): Is baptism footage seen?	Assign	8
(C24): Video demonstrates evangelism techniques	Assign	8
(C14): Does subject describe tactile sensation from God?	Define	6
(C27): Son/daughter/child/adopted into family of God?	Refine	6
(C10): Does subject exhort congregation?	Align	5

Table 6: Codes by Category

Code Category	Number of OVTs	% of sample
Define	69	67.6%
Align	74	72.5%
Refine	84	82.4%
Assign	77	75.5%
Total	102	100%

Strongly-Coded Videos. Most OVTs invoked tropes in multiple categories, but many of these favored one category over the other three. For instance, video #36 depicted 5 tropes in the Define category, but only 1 trope in each of the other three categories. These videos, where one category was clearly more prominent than the others, were marked as *strongly-coded* videos. In the sample dataset, 69 videos (67.6%) were marked as strongly-coded.

A subset of strongly-coded videos was composed of OVTs that used tropes in a single category only. These videos were *exclusively-coded*. For instance, video #136 contained 3 codes in the Define category, and zero codes in any other category. Overall, there were 11 videos (10.8%) that fell into the exclusively-coded subset. Videos that fell into the strongly-coded subset tended to be in the Define or Refine categories, while exclusively-coded videos were overwhelmingly part of the Define category (63.6% of all exclusively-coded videos, in fact).

Some statistical differences were found between subgroups of strongly-coded and exclusively-coded OVTs. For instance, the mean duration of strongly-coded Align OVTs was only 2:50, which is much lower than the overall mean video duration, as well as the mean durations from the other three categories. Similarly, the mean church size in the strongly-coded Align category was larger than the overall dataset, and the mean founding date was more recent. A full summary of strongly-coded means can be found in Table 7.

Table 7: Means of Strongly-Coded OVTs by Category

	n	Means			
		Time	Word Count	Size	Year
Define	20	4:13	618	11,465	1968
Align	9	2:50	507	15,155	1986
Refine	28	3:38	551	11,235	1982
Assign	12	4:10	644	10,981	1969
Total Dataset	102	3:41	569	11,430	1973

A series of one-sample t-tests were used to compare means of four measures (duration, word count, church size and year founded) among the four subgroups of strongly-coded videos (Define, Align, Refine and Assign). For each test, the null hypothesis stated that there was no difference between means for any given measure between any subgroup and the overall population. For most measures, the t-test failed to reject the null hypothesis, suggesting that there were no statistically significant differences between subgroups. However, three t-tests produced exceptions. For the measure of video duration, the alternative hypothesis stated that the sample mean is smaller (shorter) than the population mean. First, the one-sample t-test for the Align subgroup rejected the null hypothesis with $t(8) = 2.00$, $p = 0.01$ at a 0.95 confidence level. That is, the means of strongly-coded Align videos were shown to be shorter than the mean duration of the overall population. Secondly, for the measure of the church's founding year, the alternative hypothesis stated that the sample mean is larger (more recent) than the population mean. The one-sample t-test for the Align subgroup rejected the null hypothesis with $t(8) = 4.77$, $p < 0.001$ at a confidence level of 0.95. Thirdly, the t-test for the Refine subgroup rejected the null hypothesis with $t(27) = 2.20$, $p = 0.02$ at a confidence level of 0.95. In other words, strongly-coded Align and strongly-coded Refine videos tended to be from churches that were founded more recently than OVTs from the overall population.

One sample t-tests were also performed on the four measures of exclusively-coded videos, but only for the Define subgroup, as the sample size for the other subgroups were too small. No

statistically significant differences were found between the Define means and the population means for any of the four measures.

Finally, the data also showed that churches do not tend to use one code category exclusively. 15 churches had more than one strongly-coded OVT in the dataset, while only 2 churches used a single category of strongly-coded videos. That is, the churches studied did not tend to produce only one kind of video. Rather, they used OVTs to perform multiple storytelling functions. Additionally, no church in the study was found to produce more than one exclusively-coded video.

Bridge Phase: The Online Survey

The OVT survey recorded 22 responses between November and December 2015. Because the survey was distributed online and via social media, a true response rate could not be calculated since it is unknown how many people actually received the invitation to participate. All 22 responses indicated the main campus of their church was located in the United States, and all but one respondent indicated s/he worked full-time for their church (one respondent indicated part-time employment).

Survey data confirmed assumptions made in earlier stages of research about the method of distribution of video content. Every respondent indicated their church used either YouTube or Vimeo (or both), and all but one respondent indicated they used their church website for distributing video content. Furthermore, all respondents indicated their church maintained an active Facebook account.

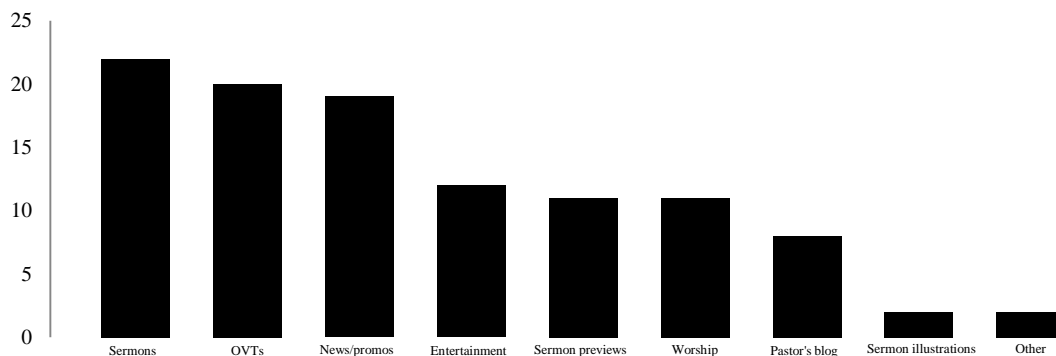
The mean weekend attendance for all respondent churches was 11,486, which is consistent with the mean worship attendance for all OVTs in the dataset (11,430), but is considerably higher than the overall mean of all 100 of the largest churches in the nation (8,731). Respondents also indicated that in the past year, their church has produced a range of OVTs numbering between

zero and 268. The mean number of OVTs produced for all respondents who answered the question was 34 (2 respondents did not answer this question).

Of the 22 respondents, 73% indicated they currently use OVTs as a part of their communication strategy, and an additional 14% indicated that their church has used OVTs at some point in the past. It is important to note that this survey was self-selecting, and was targeted specifically at church leaders who do in fact use OVTs, so this statistic is hardly generalizable to a broader population. If anything, it is surprising that the rate of OVT usage was not much higher. By contrast, it was surprising to learn that over 90% of respondents indicated “This church produces OVTs primarily to be shown in worship” while only one respondent indicated “This church produces OVTs primarily to be shared online”. Although the percentage of churches that produce OVTs for worship is higher than the total number of respondents who indicated that their church uses OVTs currently or at some point in the past (87%), it is at least clear that fewer churches are producing OVTs for the Internet than initially assumed.

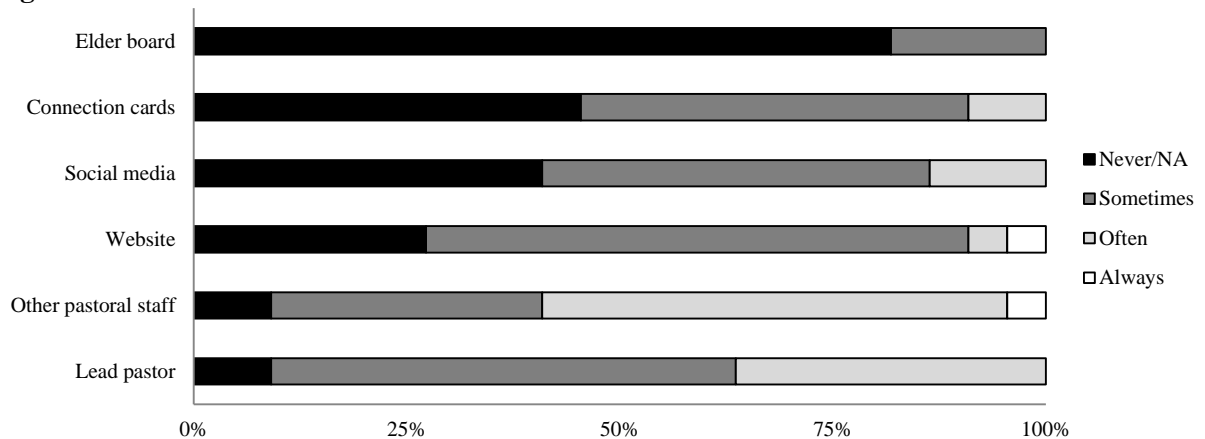
OVTs were among the most common types of video content shared on the Internet, second only to sermons. All 22 respondents indicated their church regularly shares sermon videos on the Internet, while 20 also share OVTs. Figure 3 shows how many churches share each type of video content.

Figure 3: Types of video content shared by churches



Ideas for OVTs, or “leads” came from a variety of places, but most often from pastoral staff, either the lead pastor or another staff pastor. Leads also frequently came from online channels such as social media and the church website. One respondent indicated OVT leads “Always” come from their church website. Elder boards were the least common source of story leads. Figure 4 shows the full results for lead sources.

Figure 4: Sources of OVT leads



Once leads are identified, media and communication staff most commonly take over the production process. Volunteers are also frequently involved, and outside consultants or contractors have some involvement as well. Pastoral staff have marginal roles in the production process, though other pastoral staff have more involvement than lead pastors. Figure 5 shows the level of involvement for several roles in each church, and Figure 6 breaks down the specific contribution to the OVT production process by role. Naturally, media staff are heavily involved in the initiating projects, writing/editing scripts and approving final cuts. Pastoral staff also frequently offer “other input” to the process.

Figure 5: Level of involvement in the production process by role

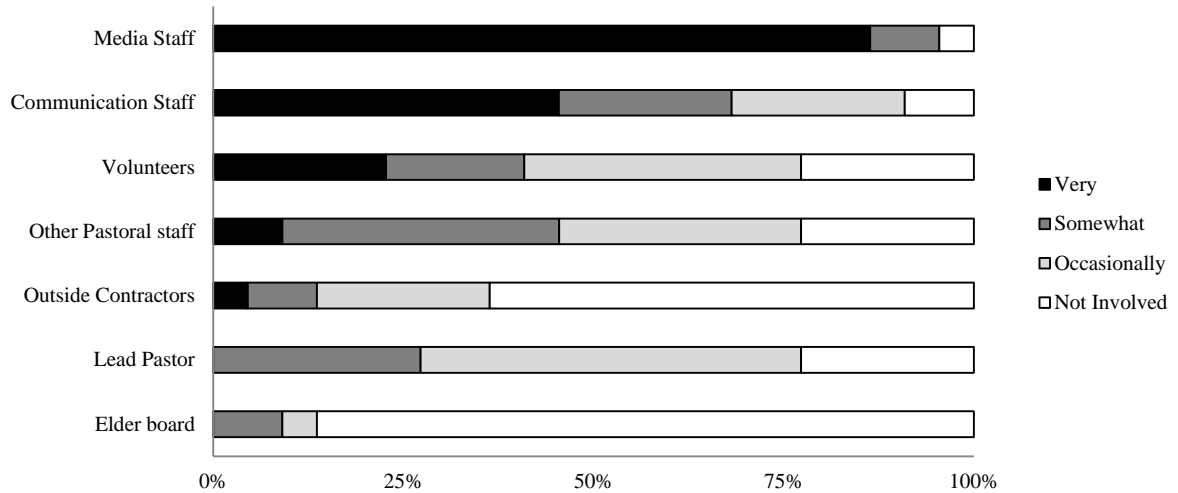
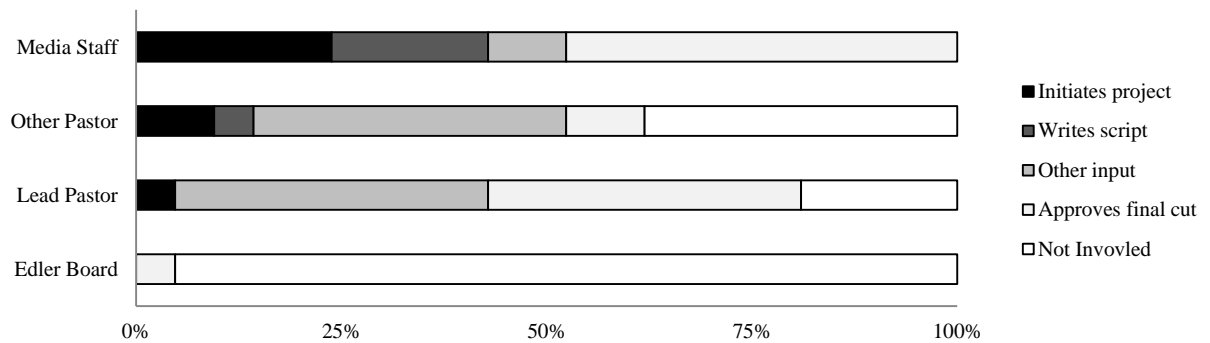


Figure 6: Specific role in OVT production process



About half of the respondents provided personally-identifiable information, such as email address, church name, or church website. Four of these respondents agreed to participate in subsequent portions of this research. In the next section, they represent Coastal Church, Victory Church, West Side Christian, and Faith Community Church.

Research Phase Two: The Qualitative Data

The second research phase selected seven churches as individual case study sites. Summary information about each church is listed in Table 8. All seven of these churches had at least one OVT transcribed and coded as a part of Research Phase #1, and all appear in the dataset of the nation's 100 largest churches (as identified by Outreach Magazine). Pseudonyms for

churches and individuals are used throughout this chapter, and some identifying information has been obfuscated to preserve anonymity.

The following presentation of data for each of the seven case study sites provides answers to four broad questions related to OVT usage within the local church: 1) how are OVTs currently being used; 2) what is the purpose behind the use of OVTs, or what specific objectives is the church trying to meet; 3) what themes and motifs are prominent in this church’s library of OVTs; and 4) what instruction or specific advice for other churches can be gleaned from the church. Data in this section is largely presented in textual format as responses to interview questions or as narrative analysis, however some quantitative measures are presented when available.

Table 8: Summary of case study sites

Church name (pseudonym)	Region	Primary data collection methods
Grace Church	Midwest	Site visit, print literature, website
West Side Christian Church	Southwest	Phone interview, website
Victory Church	Southeast	Two email interviews, website
Green Hills Baptist	Southeast	Site visit, print literature, website
Coastal Church	West	Phone interview, app download, website
Southside Christian	Midwest	Site visit, in person interview, website
Faith Community Church	Southeast	Phone interview, internal documents, website

Grace Church

Grace Church is a prolific producer of OVTs. As of June 2016, the church’s official YouTube channel featured nearly 80 OVTs, most of which have been published online at a rate of once per week. They also routinely share their OVTs on Facebook.

An OVT was shown in worship during the researcher’s site visit in May of 2016. This particular OVT, entitled “Sharon’s Story”, features a woman discussing how she and her husband worked through marital troubles “after coming to the church for help”. Even though Grace Church is a large megachurch with campuses in multiple states, the subject makes several claims about the intimate, familial feel of the church: “It feels like a small church. We all know each other. I feel like everybody hugs you, everybody loves you.” She also describes a personal relationship with

church staff. During one visit to the church office, an unnamed staff member meets her and exclaims, “Oh my gosh, it’s YOU guys!” She goes on to say, “They knew who we were!” and later explicitly thanks the staff in general as well as the lead pastor by name “for basically changing our life, our marriage, and our business”. The video attempts to normalize the experience of Sharon and her husband by describing the church as a safe place where others can find similar stories: “There were other people that had testimonies that we heard, there were other people that, you know, told us about other people that had issues in the past that were doing well now.”

This OVT was played following the sermon as an introduction to the offering collection, and was framed by the service host (a staff pastor) as an example of how giving to Grace Church can have a real impact on the lives of hurting people in the community. This theme, in fact, is common at Grace Church, and seems to reveal the motivations behind the production and sharing of OVTs. A Facebook post in July of 2016 voices these motivations explicitly by introducing an OVT this way: “This is why we do what we do. Every volunteer, in every department, at every campus plays a significant role in changing people's lives. Without you, none of this would be possible!” Furthermore, the church website also explicitly links Grace Church and God’s power to change lives: “Find more *life transformation stories* of God’s love and *His use of Grace Church* on our Videos page” (emphasis added).

This is consistent with a broader emphasis at Grace Church, where sharing one’s story holds the “power to change lives” and the very act of sharing is imbued with life-changing significance. For instance, the welcome table in the lobby distributes a brightly colored card with “Share your praise report” in large letters on the front. The back reads:

*** [sic] If you have been prayed for and received a healing touch from God, we would love to hear about it! Your testimony is a building block in not only your faith, but someone else’s faith, so please share!

On Facebook, Grace Church also frequently posts OVTs and invites followers to share them with their friends who may be facing similar challenges. One OVT features someone who overcomes

panic-attacks by listening to a Grace Church CD. It appears on Facebook with the text, “If you know someone who is going through this, share this with them. It could make a huge difference.”

The “huge difference” is a clear nod to the supernatural character of Grace Church’s worldview. Congregants are told over and over that God is working in the world, and the evidence can readily be seen by those with the eyes to see. In fact, OVTs at Grace Church routinely feature strong supernatural themes or miraculous overtones. “Officer Mark’s Story” describes how Mark, an off-duty police officer, walked away unscathed from a high-speed motorcycle crash, much to the amazement of his doctors:

I did a CT scan. I did an MRI. I did X-rays. Four hours later the doctor comes back in to me and he said, “My entire staff are baffled because all of your tests have come back normal. You are truly a walking miracle. I can’t explain it.”

Although the doctors have no explanation, Mark is quick to attribute his wellbeing to being “encapsulated” by God’s supernatural protection – something he learned about in a sermon from Psalm 91 that was preached at Grace Church’s just two days before his accident. The OVT even includes a short clip of the lead pastor’s sermon:

[You are] so encapsulated with the anointing and power of God. You were built for this, you were called for this, this is your season to be alive. God put you here, and when he put us here, he encapsulated us. So ‘he that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty’.

Mark’s story is not unique at Grace Church. Many OVTs depict miraculous healings, supernatural circumstances, and instances of divine intervention. But ordinary, this-worldly topics also appear frequently in Grace Church’s videos, often in striking tension with the supernatural. For example, stories of profitable real estate transactions and successful business startups are common.

“Shirley’s Story” tells the story of how Shirley went from living paycheck-to-paycheck to owning a successful bakery business, ostensibly as a result of God’s providence. Although at one point she attributes her success to God (“it had to be God!”), her self-confidence comes through just as strongly:

My daughter had a birthday party and I went to order a cake... They told me it was \$65 for a cake. With that being said, I decided I was gonna make the cake myself. And I did. And I was amazing at what I did. I didn't know God had blessed me with this talent. And I figured if God had blessed me with this talent, I was gonna keep going with this talent and see what else I can do.

Later, Shirley explicitly identifies the source of her success as her choice to “ask for it”: “[The pastors] talked about this. They said if you want something, you ask for it. You tell God what you want, and you pray over it.”

By weaving together supernatural and ordinary elements, OVTs at Grace Church make stories of God's faithfulness accessible to others. They ground the miraculous in ordinary contexts, which encourages congregants to imagine supernatural elements woven into their own lives. God is always working, but we may not always be able to see it. Thus it is important to share OVTs with others – “it could make a huge difference” – because God may be trying to reveal himself in new ways. Furthermore, congregants need not wait passively for miracles or supernatural moves of God. As Shirley says, “you tell God what you want,” but not out of a purely selfish motivation. God will give what is asked in order for members of Grace Church to share stories about the faithfulness of God with others.

In order to elicit specific advice for other churches about the production and distribution of OVTs, two production staff members at Grace Church were approached multiple times for interviews, but they ultimately declined to participate. Several observations are instructive, however. First, it seems that powerful OVTs at Grace are born out of a culture of storytelling where congregants are regularly encouraged to look for opportunities to tell their story to others. Coupled with the emphasis on the supernatural, congregants discern that their stories hold spiritual power and can be used to transform the world around them. This culture of storytelling is supported by a variety of mechanisms and through a variety of channels. Particularly effective is the way Grace Church weaves “sacred” and “secular” elements together in their OVTs, which can help congregants see miraculous events in their own lives. If OVTs depicted *only* miraculous events, many congregants would be unable to relate to the stories. But in a context of mundane,

everyday activity, viewers are taught to approach life with an eye towards discovering God at work around them. Secondly, the purpose behind storytelling is made very clear at Grace, and the motivation for telling a story is placed outside oneself. Telling a story is an evangelistic activity that helps Grace Church reach people who need spiritual healing. This in turn helps Grace Church meet its broader goals of impacting their community with the gospel. Thirdly, OVTs at Grace shape the social landscape to make a megachurch feel “like a small church” where intimate, personal relationships are the norm. This seems to be a particularly effective strategy to make congregants feel connected with pastoral leadership – though they may never meet the pastors face-to-face, viewers feel a strong connection with them. It is worth noting that every OVT the researcher encountered at Grace Church included a section that thanked the lead pastors (there are two at Grace Church) by name. Nearly verbatim, every video includes the phrase, “Thank you, Pastor Don and Pastor Nancy for _____.” Hardly an accident, this seems to be a specific strategy employed by production staff to present Grace Church in a way that inclines viewers to expect a personal, intimate experience when visiting Grace Church.

West Side Christian Church

West Side Christian Church is also a prolific producer of OVTs. According to Jeremy, the church’s Creative Director, they try to produce around two OVTs per month. About 90% of their OVTs are produced for use in worship, while videos that are too long or don’t connect with the theme of the service are released online instead. West Side has a collection hosted on Vimeo entitled ‘Stories’ that contains nearly 40 OVTs, but it has not been updated in nearly 3 years. More recent OVTs are posted on the church website, though the timestamps on these videos indicate they have been uploaded only once per month. The website also displays a number of text-based stories and testimonies alongside their collection of OVTs.

A common theme at West Side suggests that OVTs can sharpen the congregation's spiritual senses so they can see God more clearly. Jeremy notes that stories can help reveal what God is doing for those who may be unable to discern it on their own:

If you never see God move, you really struggle with how things are going... So when you're telling stories, people can look to the screen and say, "There is movement around here, and God's just waiting to move in me..." If we never hear about stories, we kind of lose the energy and excitement to keep going because there are seasons where you may not feel God as closely as others and he may not be doing as much in your life or you're not recognizing it. So these stories allow people to know that God is moving all around them

Moreover, OVTs also show that an experience with God available to all, not just for the spiritually elite:

Often times someone will look up and see a pastor and feel like their stories are not for them or they can't relate because a pastor lived a perfect life. While that's obviously not true, that's what so many people think, so these stories really help bring home the realities to the people so they know they're not alone in these struggles.

To put it another way, one of the purposes motivating West Side's use of OVTs is an attempt to define reality by "normalizing" certain experiences. In 2013, the church presented a series of sermons that focused on the miracles stories recorded in the Gospel of Luke. To supplement the series, the video team at West Side produced a series of OVTs that shared stories about modern-day miracles experienced by people in the congregation. As Jeremy explains, "We got to show everyday people [who] found healing and found a miracle in their life. It brings home the normality of this to people, that they too can experience God in different ways." One of these OVTs, entitled "Miracles: Marsha Gregory", depicts Marsha talking about her son's medical problems as a child, some 30 years ago. Because of her faith in God, she says, she ignored advice from the doctors and prayed for her son to be healed from debilitating physical problems:

[The doctors told] us that he should not be held side by side, and we should not have him walking. The one thing Terry really enjoyed doing was walking, so we would hold either side of him and we would walk up and down, up and down. And the doctors kept telling us we were not to do that because it could ruin his hips and he would end up in a wheelchair. He was so happy to do that. We continued, we prayed, and we had faith.

Compared to other “miracle stories”, this is rather tame – there is no grand encounter with God or sky-splitting revelation of divine truth. Instead, this OVT (like most others at West Side Christian) is much more subtle in the way it depicts the miraculous. Later in her video, Marsha notes that her son grew up to have no ill effects from his childhood affliction, yet she never points to a specific moment when the healing occurred. Instead, she and her family simply “continued” on with their lives in faith sustained by the prayers of their church community: “All we knew is that we had a church that we belonged to and we knew that we could have the prayers of our friends at the church.” (It is not clear whether this refers to West Side Christian or another church altogether – viewers are left to “fill in the blanks” on their own.)

This story demonstrates that “seeing” God in the world is not always a matter of an awesome encounter with the divine. Instead, God may be supernaturally at work in the silent, subtle moments of everyday life, while the miraculous outcome may not become evident for some time. For Marsha and her family, their faith required not a moment of decision, but a sustained pattern of life that stretched over many years. It also required them to trust what they deemed to be the voice of God in opposition to the voice of the doctors who advised Marsha that her actions might permanently cripple her son. This is a trope common in many OVTs – the wisdom of God is diametrically opposed to the wisdom of the expert medical or scientific community. In fact, throughout Marsha’s story the nameless doctors are depicted as wholly inept and oblivious to the severity of Terry’s condition. For the first several years of his life, Marsha says, the doctors wouldn’t even admit that her son was disabled. But Marsha knew: “we knew that something could be wrong because he was not doing the things we knew he should be doing.” But by the time the doctors finally recognize the problem, Marsha has already decided to pray, have faith, and wait for God’s healing.

Jeremy offers a great deal of advice for other churches that want to use OVTs in their ministry. First, he recommends churches develop a clear process for producing OVTs much like his team uses at West Side. First, there are three main “entry points” for discovering new stories in

the congregation: 1) online channels, such as Facebook and the “Share Your Story” link on the church website; 2) campus pastors at each of their five campuses, who intentionally listen for stories; and 3) the church’s volunteer-based outreach team, which works with new converts and people preparing for baptism. Whenever a story is identified through these channels, staff and volunteers are encouraged to ask potential subjects immediately if they are willing to share their story on film. As Jeremy explains,

What we found was that when people just passed us the name of a great story that they heard, my video team doesn’t really have that personal relationship with these people. And so if we just called and said, “Hey, we heard this was happening in your life and we want to film it,” it comes across as really impersonal.

Jeremy’s team then works hard to develop a relationship with subjects who are willing to share their stories. They speak on the phone at least twice, and they ask the subject to complete a questionnaire to give more details about their story. The questionnaire includes questions about the story itself, but it also includes questions designed to “break down barriers” to help the subject feel more at ease. Jeremy notes that one question in particular – “Where do you feel comfortable being filmed?” – usually helps them build rapport with subjects:

It’s an odd question, but we found that when we were trying to dictate where people were being filmed, they would come and be really uncomfortable. But we’ve got people who say, ‘I’m really comfortable in my backyard’. OK, great, how about we film it there? ... A wall is broken down so they can become more familiar with us.

Some stories are simple enough that they are shared as text-based stories on the Internet. One example, a story entitled “Met My Neighbors”, appears on the church website and seems to have been written in response to a sermon series about the Biblical directive to “love your neighbor”:

This week I chose to go out in the front yard to play with my kids. I know this is a simple thing, but when I did, it was amazing to see the other neighbor kids come out to play and the adults slowing down to say hey. Looking forward to future front yard games!

Other stories that need more extensive treatment are turned into OVTs. “We spend a lot of time in prayer over our creative [process], and I think God shows up to help us know which stories are

stronger.” Often these ‘stronger’ stories are conceived as talking head videos, which is West Side’s “go-to” story format. Sometimes though, the video team encounters a story they feel needs more emphasis: “those stories that, when you hear them, they just kind of wreck you”, as Jeremy puts it. One approach to sharing these kinds of stories involves setting an OVT to a well-known worship song and organizing the flow of the story around the structure of the music. For instance, the OVT “Testimony – Martinez” features no spoken dialogue at all, but instead narrates the story one sentence at a time with text printed on iPad screens. After describing how Trevor and Melissa Martinez struggled through a rocky marriage, the text synchronizes with the music lyrics at the point in the story where the couple finally comes to faith:

Your mercy reigns
Your mercy covers me
Your grace sustains
Your grace is all I need

Though this story of marital strife and reconciliation has the potential to “wreck” the viewer’s emotions, it is placed firmly in the context of “everyday life” at West Side. Interestingly, the video climaxes almost exactly at the mid-point of the video, while the rest of the OVT demonstrates how the couple went about rebuilding their relationship by participating in a number of church activities such as baptism, life groups, and worship. Moreover, the Martinezes say a great deal (via their iPads) about the ongoing, continual development of their faith: “God is showing us what it means to have faith.... It’s about walking with God and with others... Just when we think we’re done growing, God starts another part of the journey ... God is developing our faith, our patience, our character”.

Victory Church

Victory Church has produced OVTs for the past six or seven years, and hosts about three dozen OVTs on its Vimeo page. The vast majority of the video content available through Victory’s online streams includes sermon clips and promo videos for events at Victory. The

church does occasionally share OVTs on Facebook, but the interaction with these videos is markedly less frequent than other types of video content. For instance, an OVT posted on Facebook in June of 2016 received just over 40 Likes and 2 comments, while a sermon clip video (also posted in June of 2016) received over 200 Likes, several comments, and over 100 Shares.

Whereas some churches use OVTs to frame reality by sharpening spiritual senses, Victory Church is much more explicit about using OVTs to accomplish specific, practical communication goals. As such, these goals and themes of OVTs at Victory are usually closely connected. Lori, a Producer at Victory, notes that they rarely create an OVT purely for use in worship: “It’s not that often that our videos directly correspond with the sermon, we usually produce them to pair with another part of what the church is doing.” Cassie, the church’s Communication Director, agrees, adding that OVTs are extremely useful for communicating with the entire church at once:

If something is truly important to who we are and what we’re trying to accomplish as a church (small groups, evangelism, salvation, missions, local outreach), then OVTs are a huge part of the strategy of getting people involved. It’s one of the only ways to get something tangible in front of ten thousand people at once. It’s the only thing we do that captures emotion, facts, direction, and story all at once.

Naturally, clear connections with specific programs and ministries of Victory are easily observable in their OVTs. One video entitled “Prayer Story: Darryl Stubbins” features an older man, Darryl, who talks about how he became serious about his faith after coming to Victory Church four years ago. In particular, he talks about how he learned to pray by participating in The Boiler Room, a prayer ministry at Victory. According to the church website, the name of the ministry comes from nineteenth century theologian Charles Spurgeon,

[who] referred to the prayer gatherings of his church as the “boiler room.” In Spurgeon’s time, boiler rooms were the powerhouses, the driving forces of everything. And he believed that prayer was the spiritual power behind the effectiveness of his ministry. At every Victory campus there is an opportunity for you to gather and pray for God’s blessing on the worship gatherings. As a part of the Boiler Room team you can choose to participate during any service time as frequently as you like. Prayer guides and tips for praying will be posted in this group that will help you maximize your time in prayer.

Hungry to grow deeper in his faith, Darryl explains, “One day I thought, you know, I struggle with prayer, I’ll try the Boiler Room, mainly because I thought I could learn something about prayer from the people who go there. So I went.” It turned out to be a powerful experience for Darryl – more than he expected, in fact:

It was an incredible time. I remember going in saying, “Are we gonna actually pray for like an hour, or are we gonna, you know, do 15 minutes and knock off, or what?” And, you know, an hour went by like that [snaps his fingers] and it was great.

Emboldened by his experience with the Boiler Room, Darryl explains later in the video how he took it upon himself to start a new prayer ministry. After having dinner with friends from Victory and learning that they all had adult children who were struggling spiritually, Darryl

sent an email the next day to those guys and asked if they’d ever want to get together and pray about that together. And literally within 15 minutes I think everybody had responded, “Yes”. Since that time we’ve been meeting every week and we pray together strictly and solely for our sons. The incredible experience of pulling together with those guys and praying together has been an amazing thing.

This video serves a dual purpose for Victory Church – on one hand, it promotes the Boiler Room prayer ministry, providing information for congregants that may not know about the ministry. But on the other hand, the OVT is didactic, as it provides a template for other church members to follow to get more involved in the life of the church. Darryl is depicted as an ordinary church member who, despite his uncertainty and lack of experience, found a way to plug into a ministry at Victory. Furthermore, he took what he learned from that ministry and used it to begin a brand new ministry. This sort of initiative exemplifies what the church website describes as a core value:

“Every member of the Church is called to be a minister of the gospel through acts of loving service and a willingness to share the truth of the gospel with everyone at every opportunity.” To this point, Lori adds, “OVTs are impactful for the church body to show examples of people who are really seeking God in their daily life.” Clearly Darryl is an example to be followed by others at Victory Church.

Other OVTs provide specific guidance to church members in order to fill organizational needs and promote personal spiritual growth. “Reichmann Family: Saturday Night Church” tells the story of how one family decided to attend a new Saturday evening worship service at Victory instead of their usual service on Sunday morning. Upon learning of the new Saturday service, Zach Reichmann says he was generally supportive of the idea since the nontraditional starting time would provide another opportunity for others to attend worship: “That’s a great idea because it’ll attract people who may not want to come on a Sunday morning.” But as Zach explains, he soon realized the organization’s goals for the new service were slightly different than he initially assumed: “No you don’t understand. We need your seat on Sunday morning, so that’s why we made the Saturday night campus for you.” As it turned out, the new service required Zach and his family to actively choose whether or not they would align themselves with Victory’s goals – they had to decide whether they would attend the new service as the church leadership requested, or continue to follow their normal schedule. Eventually the Reichmanns chose to attend the new Saturday service regularly. “Actually, it was better for us,” says Zach’s wife Stephanie, who goes on to explain how much easier it is to get their young children ready for church on Saturday evenings. While the video shows footage of their family cooking breakfast together, Zach explains other benefits of going to church on Saturday. Sunday mornings are now reserved for relaxing together as a family: “It helps us get the best version of a Sabbath as we can.” Moreover, Zach explains that their new schedule gave them more opportunity to demonstrate to their children the importance of volunteering for other ministries at Victory Church:

We thought it was time to start showing our kids that church is not just a place where you show up once a week, and you know, you buy your ticket and watch the show and go home. It’s a community.... They realize this isn’t just magic – we show up and it’s here. People serve and work hard to make this happen.

So by choosing to alter their routine, the OVT suggests that the Reichmanns found a number of personal and spiritual benefits that they otherwise would not have known. Compared with other strategic communication approaches – a printed announcement in the bulletin or a direct appeal

from the pastor via mass email, for instance – an OVT is a far more effective way to encourage church members to make personal sacrifices to promote organizational goals. Cassie agrees: “A story... accomplishes so much – it’s relatable, it gives information about what church involvement looks like, and [does] much more than a stage announcement or written piece can do.”

Finally, Cassie notes that OVTs can become “a resource hog”, especially in smaller churches, but she does suggest that any church can benefit from even a simple video testimonial shot on an iPhone. While video can’t entirely replace the raw, emotional power of in-person testimonies, they do offer the advantage of being able to “control time and information” – both consistent with the pragmatic goals motivating the use of OVTs at Victory Church.

Green Hills Baptist

Green Hills Baptist also produces OVTs with clear, practical goals in mind. Green Hills has produced OVTs intermittently over the past decade – their Vimeo channel includes a handful of videos beginning in 2008 titled “Two Minute Testimonies”, while more recent OVTs use “God Story” or simply “Stories” for their series branding. This second group of videos has only been published within the first half of 2016, following a long period where no evidence of OVTs can be found. This gap is likely explained by the recent history of the congregation, who lost their lead pastor to cancer in 2014. After a lengthy search process, their new lead pastor was installed in the Fall of 2015

An OVT was used in worship during a site visit in the Spring of 2016. The video was played before the sermon and served as a transition between the main worship set and the message, which also allowed time for a stage reset. The video features two subjects reflecting on their recent mission trip to Nicaragua. The first subject, Butler, identifies himself as a senior manager at his company and as the team leader who enjoys “taking guys on trips for their first time” and “watching their eyes be opened”. The second subject is Lex, for whom the mission trip

to Nicaragua was his first experience outside the United States. Although the original purpose of the trip was to perform light construction tasks, Lex asserts, “This was not an electrical trip. This was a trip to share the Gospel. We wanted to find hearts that wanted to be given to the Lord and give these people hope.” Butler and Lex go on to describe how they went “door-to-door evangelizing” during their trip, and how they even shared the gospel during a baseball game with 30 Nicaraguans who “came from every different direction from the jungle”. The video ends with a title screen featuring the question “Where is God calling you to go this year?” as well as the URL for the missions page on the church website.

This OVT dovetails with a focus on international mission work, which is clearly a major theme at Green Hills Church. Not coincidentally, there was an informational session about mission trip opportunities taking place during the researcher’s site visit. Also, their 2016 ministry plan document, which was distributed in the church lobby, names their first of six strategic focuses, “Go global with the Gospel”, and allots 12% of their projected revenue over the next two years toward this focus. Moreover, mission work is consistently framed as a primary component of personal and spiritual growth. The church website describes a mission trip as a way to “challenge your faith, your personal ministry, and your view of this culture and world”. The website also shares information about Green Hills’ “100 Family Challenge”, which is an initiative that aims to recruit 100 families for long-term missionary work – families “who God may be calling to relocate for the sake of the Gospel”.

Green Hills also hosts a series of OVTs focused on financial generosity and the spiritual (and tangible) benefits of giving to the church. These kinds of videos, common in many churches, are often produced to supplement stewardship campaigns by encouraging church members to tithe regularly. They usually include similar elements: 1) the subject’s history of debt and financial struggle, either throughout adulthood or as the result of a bad business deal or, more commonly, the Great Recession of 2008; 2) the subject’s initial act of financial “obedience” to God, often paired with uneasiness and worry, particularly from a spouse or partner; 3) the subject

unexpectedly receives a new job, a raise, or other financial windfall; 4) the subject uses language about being “blessed” by God, who “meets all of our needs” by “making the 90% go further than we made the 100% go on our own”; and 5) the subject invites others to also be generous with their finances, sometimes explicitly exhorting church members to tithe.

“Don and Lisa Matthews” is one example of this type of OVT. The video depicts a middle-aged couple as they sit in their home discussing the blessings that God has provided as a result of their financial generosity. Don opens the video by saying, “I gotta say, my finances are in place, my debt has come down, and we’ve truly been blessed financially ever since I started giving.” Lisa acknowledges her initial uneasiness, however, saying “that was hard for me at first, years ago.” Despite her worry, she continued to give, even though her motives were less than noble: “I gave out of guilt, and now instead we just try and give from our hearts because we want to.” As a result of their financial obedience, as the video suggests, Don and Lisa have been materially blessed since they made the decision to give. B-roll footage shows the couple riding horses on a large country farm, presumably a luxury they’ve been able to afford as a result of their financial obedience. Lisa suggests as much herself:

Every time we give we are blessed. . . . If we just have faith and trust in God and continue to put him first, then he will reach down and – he takes care of us anyway. We have what we have because of him.

But there are clear spiritual benefits as well. Lisa adds, “[God] has grown us through the tough times, through the most painful times like these times, we’re growing. We’re growing in our faith by trusting him.”

Another OVT entitled “Tom & Cathy Edison Testimony” combines the theme of financial giving with Green Hills’ emphasis on world missions. The video depicts Tom and Cathy talking about their mission work in a Haitian orphanage that was funded by Green Hills’ “Crazy Love campaign giving”. They spend a few moments reflecting on their trip, reviewing lessons they have learned along the way, but then shift to exhorting viewers directly. Tom says,

I would just encourage you, as part of the body of Christ at Green Hills, just to be his hands and his feet and to um, if giving financially is your gift, then give generously. If giving of your time and going to Haiti and loving these kids is your gift, then give generously. If prayer is your gift, pray faithfully.

Though the call to financial generosity is only part of a larger admonition, the same expectation of receiving a blessing from God as a result is still implied. Cathy says near the end of the video, “He’s blessed us in ways that even now we’re just beginning to understand.” Expanding on this comment, she remembers the moment she first recognized the enormous economic disparity between herself and the Haitian people, and then frames it as an obligation to give to Green Hills’ mission work:

I look at the grass at our home completely different now. I know that sounds a little silly, but I honestly spend more money taking care of our yard than the Haitians make in an entire year. This trip definitely changed my life and changed the way that I’m going to give in the future.

Thus God’s blessing implies responsibility. Because Tom and Cathy have the means to pay for something as ordinary as lawn care, they also feel compelled to financially support Green Hills’ mission work to alleviate the “complete devastation” the Haitian people live with every day. Certainly the intention is that viewers will come to the same conclusion.

Multiple staff members at Green Hills declined to participate in interviews for this thesis-project, but at least two primary takeaways for other churches can be identified. First, Green Hills demonstrates how to effectively align OVTs to complement broader themes and emphases in the church. OVTs are one component of a larger strategy to raise awareness of international mission work. Furthermore, OVTs describe multiple points of entry, or multiple ways viewers can get involved – while only a relatively small number of people can physically travel to other countries, anyone can give financially or pray for those that do. Secondly, OVTs at Green Hills provide “eyewitness” accounts of international mission work. Often the allure of an international mission trip is rooted in the opportunity to see and experience exotic settings. OVTs that depict actual footage from foreign countries as well as missionaries who can articulate the thrill of travelling to

a new country can pique viewers' attention far more effectively than other communication tools. By the same token, eyewitness accounts can demystify the experience of foreign mission work. If other "normal" people are willing to venture halfway around the world as a missionary, others may be more willing to explore it as a viable option for themselves.

Coastal Church

Coastal Church maintains an extensive library of online video content, including dozens of OVTs, although most of them were published on the church YouTube channel between three and five years ago. Benton, Coastal Church's Pastor of Communications, notes that some of these gaps are due to the fact that video production is extremely resource-intensive, requiring vast commitments of staff, money, and time. As a result, Coastal's video output has fluctuated over the past several years depending on the availability of staffing. More recently, they have shifted to other types of video content.

These shifts in staffing and type of video content correspond with evolving communication goals at Coastal. In 2013, Coastal produced a series of fairly typical talking head videos that allowed members of the congregation to share their spiritual autobiographies. One OVT, "The Mascot", depicts a nameless subject describing how he overcame a lifelong heroin addiction by attending an informal Bible Study in a friend's garage:

I went to somebody I trusted and they said Tommy has a Bible Study in his garage, a men's Bible study, just a little intimate gathering in his garage on Wednesdays. Maybe you should check it out.... And I went into Tommy's garage and it was difficult, but it inspired a sense of wholeness that I'd never had.

Then, during another season of intense OVT production, Coastal produced a series of OVTs under the "Coastal Heroes" brand to highlight volunteers in the congregation. Coinciding with the church's move towards multi-site ministry, these videos attempted to meet two specific goals particularly germane to multi-site churches: presenting Coastal as a unified church, and recruiting additional volunteers to fill a growing list of needs.

“Kim Saunders: Coastal Hero” is one OVT that meets these goals by introducing Kim, an instrumental leader for Coastal Church’s women’s ministry: “Thousands of women have been blessed because Kim Saunders said ‘yes’ when God asked her to do something.” After moving to San Diego over two decades ago, her “eyes were opened” to ministry needs all around her: “I started seeing women everywhere overwhelmed with life.” So Kim took it upon herself to start a variety of ministries where women “in all seasons of life can connect and grow”. While the video celebrates how Kim’s service has benefited the entire church, it also closes with a message about the continuing need for volunteers to step up and work alongside Kim: “There is still much to be done. The Women’s Ministry is developing an outreach to teen moms and a new one-on-one mentoring program...”

Although the “Coastal Heroes” series was helpful for a season, it was eventually cut due to what Benton describes as high “labor costs”. 2015 brought further downsizing and reorganization of the communication and media staff, but these cuts challenged the church to find innovative ways to communicate. For instance, the church began publishing short messages recorded by their lead pastor for distribution on social media. These videos are much more informal in tone, and typically share a devotional thought or Scripture verse instead of a direct appeal for action.

More notably, Coastal leadership also made a decision to shift from producing stories to developing a platform where congregants could share stories with one another directly. They accomplished this by investing in a mobile app-based platform for the distribution of video-based stories within their congregation that “lets you create and share life transformation video stories that match the circumstances of those you want to reach with the Gospel.” Upon opening the app, users are asked to “upload your story” by recording a short video using the camera on their mobile device. If users need help recording their video, a downloadable “Testimony Planning Guide” offers a four-part, fill-in-the-blank template for users to organize their story. The format is anchored by three main segments – “I was...”, “Then Jesus...”, and “Since then...” – followed by

a final section where users are invited to add “Encouragement for others”. Each section is further broken down into specific prompts. For example,

Before giving my heart to God, my life/heart was _____. I believed I would be happy if I _____. For example, it wouldn’t be uncommon for me to _____ to try to fill the emptiness in my heart... I finally decided that I wanted to receive Jesus as my savior, so when I was _____, I proceed to _____. ... After I received Jesus, the things I did with my time completely changed. Now I _____. My life has changed dramatically. Though I may still struggle with things, they’re getting better, and I’m different in so many ways, such as _____.

Once recorded and uploaded to Coastal’s servers, a team of staff members reviews each video to ensure they meet video quality standards, are an appropriate length, and are free of any “crazy theology” or other questionable content. Staff members also add tags that correspond to themes discussed in each video, such as “substance abuse”, “depression”, or “financial problems”. This allows app users to quickly search tags for videos related to specific issues.

Since these videos are usually recorded by individuals with a mobile phone or web camera, they lack many of the characteristics of a typical OVT. They appear much more “raw” than most videos produced by evangelical megachurches – they are composed of only a single shot talking head and employ no special effects like overlaid text, music, alternate camera angles, or audio enhancement. Yet, as Benton claims, the “emotional impact” of these videos can be just as great as any professionally-produced video clip that takes hundreds of staff-hours to create.

Despite the low production value of these videos, Coastal’s story app has been a huge success by any measure. The platform hosts hundreds of user-contributed videos on dozens of topics, and some of the most popular videos have been viewed tens of thousands of times. Some videos even feature celebrities like NFL players and Hollywood actresses, and a few have been incorporated into Coastal Church’s worship services. Benton adds that they hope to expand the platform soon to allow other churches to host their own “platform of stories”.

However, Coastal Church’s reliance on “raw” unproduced video shouldn’t be over-stated. Lest it be overlooked, the in-house development and maintenance of a video-heavy mobile app

requires significant financial and staffing resources. Moreover, the church continues to produce professional-grade video content each week, including some OVTs. Rather than choose between raw and more polished styles, Benton is comfortable with both ends of the spectrum, and has “never seen a reason to choose” between ‘produced’ and ‘unproduced’ video content. Both options can be used to “curate stories about what God is doing” the world. Consequently, a lack of resources shouldn’t prevent smaller churches from creating OVTs. His advice is simple: “Find a young person who already had the tech and the experience” who can help put together an OVT. But more importantly, Benton adds, “have a compelling story to tell ... Tell stories that cast a vision of who God is, not how great your church is”.

This advice is consistent with the evolution of Coastal’s storytelling strategy over the years. Whereas Coastal used to tell stories to meet organizational objectives (filling volunteer needs, etc), the church now shares stories with a more nuanced theological rationale. A story can be an evangelistic device that allows congregants to share what they’ve learned about God’s faithfulness through their struggles, or “what God is doing in the world”. Furthermore, there is inherent value for the individual storyteller, who is given the opportunity to participate in a grand vision of “who God is”.

Southside Christian Church

Southside is one of several churches stretching the limits of creativity and artistic expression in OVTs. Their Vimeo page includes a handful of OVTs posted during the winter of 2015-2016, but no other OVTs since the summer of 2014. According to the series branding, the most recent batch of OVTs was produced as part of the church’s \$35 million “Daring Faith” campus expansion campaign. No OVTs were used in the worship service during a site visit in May of 2016, but there was B-roll footage from recent OVTs used in the pre-service countdown video.

Fully understanding one's own story is the key to personal fulfillment and spiritual growth at Southside, and likewise is a common theme in their OVTs. The church website prominently displays a "Share Your Story" link that prompts users with the statement, "Your story matters because you matter to God". One OVT, entitled "Veronica's Story", appears on the church website and highlights the importance of being true to oneself as a unique creation of God: "Since I've been a Christian," says Veronica, "I've been more free to be who I am creatively, and I wasn't able to do that until I gave up holding onto this – what I wanted." The video describes how she found the freedom in Christ to explore her own creativity and to embrace her quirks and insecurities. God tells her, in fact, "There is no fear. I don't give you that fear. That's the enemy, because he knows how many people you're going to impact [by] just being you, and just being who I created you to be."

The motivation for telling stories at Southside is not purely personal, however. As the website explains, stories have enormous evangelistic potential: "Beyond its potential for deepening your own faith, your personal story is a powerful tool that God can use to encourage other believers, and to point the way to Christ for those who don't yet know Him." However, Charles, the church's Arts Ministry Operations Director, warns that the stress on evangelism shouldn't be too direct. He complains that OVTs in many churches are inauthentic because they "jump to the solution too fast": "Churches fail at telling good stories when they make it about solutions and not about problems." Drawing a parallel with the Steven Spielberg film *Schindler's List*, Charles suggests that the problem is a necessary part of the plot, and the scale of the problem must be relative to that of the solution. In *Schindler's List*, the courage and beauty of Oskar Schindler's actions cannot be fully appreciated without the intense depiction of the atrocities of the Holocaust. Similarly, evangelism should be an exercise in helping others recognize the severity of humanity's sin so that the message of Christ's life, death, and resurrection can be fully understood. The story should make it vividly clear that "the Gospel is necessary because we have a huge problem".

To tell the best stories, heavy editing is often required. Charles has a background in professional television production, so he brings to the OVT process a strong emphasis on creativity and maintaining high production value. Charles outlines his preferred workflow this way:

- 1) Leads, or ideas for stories, are first identified by small group leaders or through other ‘ad hoc’ channels in the church. Leads are sent to one of the producer/videographers on staff for review.
- 2) The producer/videographer makes an initial contact with the potential subject to gather the key points of the story and to gauge his or her willingness to participate in the production process.
- 3) The producer/videographer then consults with other staff to determine if the story should be pursued. If so, they “map out” the story into three main ‘acts’: the setup, the conflict and the payoff. They also write a list of questions to prompt the subject during the filming process. Charles notes that it’s very important that the producer/videographer to have a clear idea of what the final video should look like in order to help the subject “tell the best story”.
- 4) The producer/videographer schedules a date to film. During filming, the videographer/producer prompts the subject with questions, and often has the subject repeat portions of their story multiple times. Usually by the third or fourth time, Charles notes, the story is clearer and more coherent. It’s also appropriate for the videographer/producer to give specific cues and other direction to subjects: “Earlier you said this; could you say that again but say it this way instead.”
- 5) The producer/videographer edits the raw footage and assembles a final cut of the video. Other church staff then view and approve the final version.

Great creative license is given to the producer/videographer throughout this process. In fact, Charles suggests that creative talent is one of the biggest assets available to a church staff – yet the average life span of a church creative is a paltry two and a half years, according to Charles. Most church creatives eventually burn out, usually due to poor leadership or feeling stifled by a church’s “creative ceiling”. Namely, many pastors unintentionally contribute to premature burnout of church creatives by failing to provide supportive leadership that enables creatives to do their best work. To combat this trend, Charles recommends churches find ways to give creatives the freedom to take risks, to have “guts”, albeit with some structure that ensures they maintain a healthy work-life balance. As Charles put it, leaders need to help creatives “not be so dumb” by procrastinating or taking on too many tasks at once. Actually, he suggests that creatives work best “in a box” that sets boundaries but also leaves room for creativity to flourish.

When given proper leadership, church creatives can flourish, and their work can be dynamic and inspirational. For example, one OVT at Southside entitled “Jacob & Kirk’s Story” flips the traditional OVT format on its head to craft a story that is surprisingly effective. The OVT opens with a decision by two adult brothers, Jacob and Kirk, to get baptized at Southside. The OVT includes actual footage of their baptism, as well as a photo with the church’s lead pastor – both common tropes in OVTs. What’s more uncommon, however, is *where* the baptism occurs in the story. Most OVTs place baptism near the climax of the story representing the fulfillment of a long spiritual journey as a token of the story’s ‘happy ending’. But baptism for Jacob and Kirk is only the beginning, or as Jacob foreshadows, “Little did I know that my life would be changing in more than a few ways”. Shortly after their baptism they learn that their mother has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. The news shook both brothers, causing a great deal of emotional and spiritual turmoil: “I was angry at God. I questioned God, why he did this, why is this happening to our family?” But as Kirk explains, their newfound faith gave them tools to face a tragic situation with hope and confidence:

You have one of two options at that moment. You can stay angry and blame God. You can turn your back and run away from him, or you can turn *to* him and ask him for help in the most dire moment of your entire life.

Additional B-roll baptism footage plays as Jacob reads from Joshua 1:9: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” Finally, the brothers connect their experience with an evangelistic theme, noting that their story has given them a tool to reach others:

I’d love to be the person that guides them and say, “You know, I’ve been through some things. I’ve felt God was turning against me, and I felt that anger and the resentment you feel. But you know what? There’s other people who have felt that, and other people who love and care about you, and I’ve found that here at Southside. And that’s what makes me keep going on and why I want to give back.”

By reversing a conventional OVT storyline – that is, by placing baptism *before* a season of struggle and disappointment with God – Southside demonstrates a creative approach to

acknowledging the “problem” instead of jumping to the “solution” too quickly. This sort of artistic nuance is a valuable product of an environment where church creatives have been given the tools to flourish.

Faith Community Church

Finally, Faith Community Church also has a demonstrated commitment to pushing creative and artistic boundaries in its OVTs. The church uses OVTs extensively – according to Allen, a Video Producer on staff at Faith, they typically use two story videos in worship every weekend, and in 2015 alone they produced over four hundred videos. Several OVTs feature prominently on their website alongside other pieces of “Creative Media”. They also host large libraries of OVTs on YouTube and Vimeo, including a separate account on Vimeo called “Faith Creative”. Quantity is not all that matters, however. Faith Community sees an OVT – and storytelling in general – as an artistic endeavor where they attempt to “compete in the arena of ideas” alongside pop culture’s most influential storytellers like Geico, AT&T, and Disney. While these companies rely on having a “cool joke or a cool idea” to win “head space”, the video team at Faith Community relies on a strategy rooted in telling stories “artistically and beautifully and seamlessly, and the center of the story is... what God’s doing in people’s lives”.

Metaphor is central to Faith’s storytelling strategy, particularly metaphors of deep, transformational change. For instance, the church website’s online OVT gallery, called “Stories of Faith”, includes an invitation rich with metaphors for change:

God changes lives every day. A point in a new direction ... a different path to follow. The big question is, what made you take that path? What led you to a closer relationship with Christ? Are you currently living what you’ve learned? We would love to hear your personal story of how God has changed your life.

Metaphors also feature prominently in many of the videos they produce. One OVT, entitled ‘Keith’s Story’, tells a story of a talented musician who experienced transformation as a part of Faith Community. The OVT was shot in a dance studio, and much of the video includes a

silhouette of a dancer rehearsing ballet routines in the background of the shot. As Allen explains, the choice to include the dancer was not incidental, nor was it for purely aesthetic purposes.

Instead, it communicates a message that is central to the story:

[Keith is] a virtuoso, and he's somebody who's highly classically trained and spent decades... becoming the very best pianist he possibly could and taking his skillset to the zenith of what he could. Well, we don't have time to say that [in an OVT], so what we do is we use the metaphor of the ballerina in training to say virtuosity, extraordinary, special, unique, artist. The ballet dancer is doing a lot of narrative heavy lifting for us.

Another OVT, “Stan Eggers”, depicts a low-income, presumably uneducated man who decided to get baptized after visiting Faith Community’s inner-city food pantry. His manner of speech throughout the video frankly leaves the viewer with few expectations of spiritual depth. But then the video ends with Stan’s surprisingly rich and spiritually mature metaphor: “Have you ever seen the movie that showed Deadliest Catch where they go out and they um fish for crabs? And coming from there to a calm lake, that’s me.” Despite his broken English, Stan’s metaphor is clear – his soul has been quieted just like the sea after a storm.

The medium of film allows Faith Community to communicate messages on multiple levels at once by encoding imagery and metaphor with “subtext”. Allen admits that the subtext isn’t always explicit, but the effect can still be very powerful. Similar to ‘Keith’s Story’, another OVT entitled ‘Kendra’s Story’ uses metaphor to convey meaning without communicating it overtly. The video features Kendra, who recounts the circumstances leading to her painful divorce and how she found new meaning in life by joining a small group and volunteering in the children’s ministry. As gripping as the story is on its own, the video team at Faith Community augments it with a range of intriguing images. The OVT opens with a shot of Kendra standing in her driveway holding a garden hose. While Kendra begins her voiceover about her divorce, the camera shows several shots of water trickling out of the hose, down the street, and ultimately into a sewer. Allen explains, “As the woman’s life, her marriage, was falling apart and her hopes of having kids and a family were falling apart, her life was feeling wasted, [so] we wanted to have the metaphor of water running out of a hose into a sewer and not coming to anything.” Later the video uses a

complex sequence of special effects to extend the metaphor of loss. When a neighbor stops to speak to Kendra (still standing in her driveway with a garden hose), the camera pans around so the viewer can see an open garage in the background. The conversation between Kendra and her neighbor can't be heard, but the viewer can see the garage slowly emptying behind them. Meanwhile, Kendra's tearful voiceover explains how that moment became a turning point in her life:

He asked me a question about my husband. I just looked at him. He looked past me and the garage door was open and he could see that a lot of his stuff that had been in the garage was gone. He invited me over for dinner with he and his wife and kids and then they invited me to church. And so I came to Faith [Community Church] at a time when my life had completely fallen apart.

The effect of the imagery on the viewer is twofold. First, it adds another layer to an already rich metaphor of loss and does so in a way congruent with the subject matter of divorce (when a husband leaves his wife, he often takes with him his tools, sporting equipment, and other items traditionally stored in a garage). Secondly, as Allen explains, the sequence also demonstrates an evangelism technique:

Everyone keeps their garage doors closed; behind this garage door things aren't what they appear to be... If we'll be courageous and honest, and if somebody will stop at the neighbor's house and ask how [they're] really doing and stay longer than a minute to hear the answer, [they'll] find out that [they're] needed and God has something for [them].

So the neighbor is one of the heroes in Kendra's story; though the video doesn't record what he says, his actions 'speak' quite loudly and serve as the turning point in Kristy's story.

This kind of multilayered artistic storytelling often does not happen quickly or without a great deal of work by a talented videographer. Unfortunately, many churches shortchange the creative process by failing to recognize the unique needs and gifts of filmmakers:

A lot of churches abuse their filmmakers. The filmmaker is supposed to spend all week Monday through Friday creating these videos, staying up late at night color grading them and getting the audio mix right and shooting B-roll and doing all the overtime it takes to make great films. And then they're expected to turn around on Saturday and Sunday and be in the control room running the IMAG [live video] team. There's only so long you can take any individual let alone a creative artist and run them at that pace at 6 and 7 days a week and expect them to maintain that lifestyle. So churches, especially in filmmaking,

have terrible turnover rates ... simply because they're not playing long ball with their staff and they're not playing long ball with their filmmakers.

So by playing “long ball”, churches can promote the long-term health and artistic output of media staff. But more fundamentally, Allen points out the overlooked idea that filmmaking is a discipline distinct from other tech-heavy roles. While anyone with a video camera can churn out an OVT, the profound richness evident in Faith Community’s videos only comes from congregations who nurture the unique gifts of filmmakers by investing time, energy, and resources in their creative process. Thus, Allen’s advice to other churches comes through loud and clear: respect the videographer, and understand his or her unique needs.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented a wide array of data about OVTs as they are currently being used in some of the largest evangelical churches in the United States. The next chapter will present analysis from this data, but first, this section will summarize the key findings thus far.

First, OVTs are indeed a widespread practice in the Church today – nearly two thirds of churches in this study displayed evidence of OVTs, and there appears to be no significant correlation between the use of OVTs and church size or the age of the congregation.

Anecdotally, it may be significant to note that no historically black church was found to use OVTs. Several of the churches that use OVTs have strong Hispanic influences, but overall, churches that use OVTs are almost exclusively white.

OVTs are predominantly produced to be shown in a worship setting, but many churches also recognize the evangelistic potential of OVTs. As such, churches commonly distribute these videos on social media platforms and encourage church members to share them with their friends.

Although the structural characteristics of OVTs can vary, they tend to be around four minutes long and depict only one or two subjects. It is very common for an OVT to discuss a particular ministry or program offered by the local church, and it is almost as common for the

subject to either say the name of the church, or for church branding (such as a logo, website, or hashtag) to appear on screen. The universe of a typical OVT is highly moralized – it is common for a subject to talk about his or her “former life”, which usually includes drugs, alcohol, extra-marital sex, violence, or criminal activity. By the same token, OVTs also depict transformation, and specifically, a discrete moment of conversion where the subject comes to faith and leaves their old lifestyle behind. Another motif that appears frequently in OVTs is being blessed by God as a result of tithing or giving generously to the local church. Often the benefits are financial, but they also always include spiritual benefits. Similarly, miraculous or supernatural events are common themes in many OVTs.

The value of “sharing stories” was commonly cited as a motivation for the investment of resources into OVT production, but there was little agreement about precisely what that meant. Some churches approach OVTs as purely utilitarian – tools to accomplish pragmatic communication goals – while other churches tend to see OVT as works of art that convey meaning indirectly through metaphor.

Finally, the relationship between OVTs and staffing is complicated. Several informants noted that video production is a resource-heavy ministry, and a few warned that churches tend to overwork their video production staff. They also suggested that the field of video production is not well understood, and that pastoral leadership may need to find new ways to promote spiritual and emotional health among the men and women who produce OVTs.

CHAPTER 6

WHAT IT MEANS: ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Chapter 1 framed this thesis-project as an exercise in practical theology, or the “critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God’s redemptive practices in, to and for the world.”¹ Although the ensuing chapters have spent a great deal of time on complex theoretical arguments and fine-grained biblical exegesis, the fundamental aim of this research is to enhance the practice of ministry in the Church today. Specifically, this thesis-project aimed to shed light on a phenomenon that has swept through evangelical churches with little attention from scholars – namely, the production and distribution of Online Video Testimonies (OVTs). So this final chapter takes up the task of connecting the theoretical arguments and research findings with practical theological concerns. To do so, this chapter is organized into two broad sections based on the phrase “ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God’s redemptive practices”. The first section is aimed at “ensuring” faithful practice, and will review the data collected during this research and place it into a theoretical and biblical context, showing that OVTs are indeed faithful practice. Secondly, this chapter seeks to “enable” faithful participation in ministry by outlining a set of best practices for the production and distribution of OVTs.

Ensuring Faithful Practice

This thesis-project has argued that communication – and specifically organizational storytelling – is a constitutive activity in organizational life. Chapter 2 examined how

¹ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 6.

communication produces and reproduces the organization, or in other words, how stories do things in organizations, operating with a degree of their own agency to define reality, align relationships, refine identities, and assign meanings. The fact that nearly two-thirds of the 100 largest churches in the United States are using OVTs as a part of their communication strategy suggests that these videos have enormous potential to shape the values, assumptions, and worldviews of churches. So to what extent can this be evaluated as ‘faithful’ ministry practice?

First of all, chapter 3 argued that such a constitutive view of communication is indeed faithful to orthodox Christian tradition. That is, understanding stories as creative agents that have the ability to shape and reshape local churches is consistent with a biblically-informed view of the world. Even a cursory look at Jesus’ parables, for instance, demonstrates that stories are powerful tools that shape the way human beings interact with the world. But more than that, it was shown that Jesus’ parables can have a dramatic impact in settings far removed from their original context. In fact, the Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8) paints a dynamic picture of God that helps hearers understand divine presence long after Jesus first told the story. Or consider the many versions of Paul’s conversion narrative. Chapter 3 argued that first century Christians engaged in “story work” as they struggled to come to terms with Paul’s dramatic transformation into an Apostle. Although the highly stylized version of the story (recorded in Acts 9) clashes with other accounts recorded in Scripture, it is no more “true” or “untrue” than any of the other accounts. Each represents an attempt to affirm the larger Truth of God’s redeeming work in the world.

So if such a “constitutive” view of storytelling is consistent with Scripture, can OVTs be interpreted as modern-day manifestations of the same type of story work? To answer this question, each of the four storytelling functions (defining reality, aligning relationships, refining identities, and assigning meanings) will be examined in turn below. Each storytelling function is coupled with analysis and discussion of data presented in chapter 5 in order to show that OVTs are indeed performing these tasks, and that the result is consistent with faithful participation in God’s redemptive work in the world.

OVTs Frame Reality

OVTs can be understood as a form of holy imagination, as they work on a precognitive level to shape how viewers “see” their church and the world. For instance, Grace Church uses OVTs to help viewers see supernatural activity in the world around them, especially in the midst of everyday activities. An OVT framed the success of Shirley’s bakery business as the result of her courage to “ask God” for it – not as serendipity, hard work, or inborn talent. Viewers come away with the notion that God is eager to work in the lives of those who seek God’s favor. But other churches frame the supernatural in far less dramatic ways. West Side Christian Church, for instance, also uses OVTs to help congregants perceive supernatural activity within the natural world, but their videos encourage a worldview oriented towards sustaining faith over a lifetime. Marsha Gregory’s video presented a story of a “miraculous” healing that was only revealed after many years of prayer and faithful devotion. The effect of such framing devices has enormous potential – by teaching viewers that God is active in the world, they are empowered to live faithfully even when circumstances look bleak. In particular, Marsha made a conscious decision to trust prayer more than the advice of her son’s doctor, which is a courageous step of faith that can only be taken by someone whose reality is framed by divine constraints instead of earthly ones.

Although this particular trope (proving experts or doctors wrong) was used in only about ten percent of OVTs in the content analysis phase of this research, its relative paucity actually preserves its overall effectiveness. By any measure, medical science is one of the most authoritative fields in the world today – experts are esteemed so highly because they are indeed *experts* in their fields. It stands to reason that most stories *should* portray doctors as having the final word in matters of life and death because that is reflective of everyday life. After all, stories should preserve a level of narrative fidelity with the world, or to say it another way, stories of miraculous healings stand out against a background that takes for granted the immutability of medical science. When an OVT does share a story about a supernatural healing, however, it is so remarkable precisely because it is so rare – if every story overturned conventional expert wisdom,

they would be ineffective as framing devices. On the contrary, OVTs acknowledge on one hand the realities of everyday life, but on the other hand give viewers a glimmer of hope, a peek of what God is doing around them, by demonstrating that the so-called experts are sometimes speechless when confronted with a supernatural move of God.

Another powerful framing device used by OVTs is metaphor. The very use of metaphor is didactic, as it teaches viewers to read the world differently by giving them a fresh set eyes with which to see reality. For instance, Faith Community Church makes extensive use of metaphor to communicate messages on a precognitive level. In “Kendra’s Story”, the image of water running out of a garden hose into a gutter holds an enormous amount of subtext – it communicates loss and despair in a visceral way so the viewer can identify closely with Kendra as she faces her divorce. This has at least two potential effects on the viewer. On the one hand, the metaphor can help viewers “feel” the same feelings as the character in the video. Viewers who have undergone similar experiences are drawn into the story and journey alongside Kendra as she finds healing and comfort at Faith Community. Perhaps viewers will realize that they too can experience the same fulfillment by imitating Kendra.

But on the other hand, for viewers who cannot directly relate with Kendra’s experience, the video can open their eyes to hurting people all around them. To most, Kendra surely looked like a “put-together” suburban housewife with few real struggles. The trivial act of watering a lawn, in fact, suggests she has no need to worry about anything more serious than attending to her garden. But the OVT teaches viewers that well-manicured façades often disguise deep heartache. The nameless neighbor who perceives Kendra’s spiritual turmoil is held up as a model for other members of Faith Community who are seeking to reach others with the gospel. The video demonstrates an evangelism technique (see below) but more basically, it teaches viewers to look at others in a new way.

Other framing devices are used frequently in OVTs. One of the most common tropes, according to the content analysis phase of this research, involves using language about God’s plan,

purpose, or will. OVTs can place terrible circumstances into contexts where they are given new meaning. A cancer diagnosis, for example, can be dreadfully disorienting, prompting questions like, “Why? How could this happen to *me*?” Even many Christians find it difficult to make sense of circumstances out of their control. But an OVT can provide a new interpretive frame for individuals facing uncertainty by affirming that God is indeed still at work in the world with purpose and direction. Without being glib or discounting the fear that accompanies such a diagnosis, OVTs can assert that no cancer, no disease, no challenge has taken God by surprise. Another common trope, using language about heaven, hell, or eternity, has a similar effect – it widens the horizons for viewers by reminding them that unseen, eternal realities are far more determinative than any challenge arising from daily life.

Perhaps OVTs shape the way Christians read the world in the same way John’s Revelation unmasked the powers and principalities of his day. John’s apocalypse sought to encourage his fellow brothers and sisters by demonstrating that Rome, as omnipotent as it seemed, was not the most decisive power for daily life. God is doing battle in the heavenly realms on their behalf, and downtrodden believers need only remain faithful by looking past the vicissitudes of the day to see the real drama unfolding in heaven, where the saints worship around the throne of the Lamb, and Satan is soon to be cast into the eternal lake of fire. Surely “God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 21:3-4). In the same way, OVTs challenge believers to live into a world shaped by spiritual realities and to resist the temptation to assume the visible, earthly realm presents the most accurate picture of the world. OVTs present things as they really are, ruled by an eternal God who seeks the redemption and reconciliation of all things. Faithful Christian living necessarily begins from a worldview founded on this otherworldly vision.

OVTs Align Relationships and Configure Social Space

Half of all OVTs studied in the content analysis phase of this thesis-project depicted a specific program or ministry sponsored by a local church. In fact, this was the most commonly

used trope, occurring more often than using the name of a church in an OVT. Certainly this is significant, as it demonstrates that OVTs are widely used to promote local church programs. Many churches, especially large congregations spread out over multiple campuses, struggle with disseminating actionable communication in an organized way. Traditionally, churches have used tactics like print bulletins, newsletters, postcard mailers, announcements, and phone trees to compel church members to participate in church activities. However, as culture has become increasingly saturated with advertising “noise”, these methods have become less effective, pushing churches to find new ways to motivate congregants to join groups, Bible studies, and outreach programs. Yet this is more than a communication problem – it is part of the larger question of how churches configure social space to align hundreds (or thousands) of congregants around a common set of values and organizational goals. For a church that espouses a core value about the importance of small group participation, for instance, leadership must develop strategies to encourage congregants to join small groups. At the very least, church leadership is faced with the challenge of instilling this core value into newcomers by teaching them how to live and act as a part of this particular church.

OVTs can be used to meet these challenges. Among other things, OVTs are behavioral cues that teach congregants what is expected of them if they wish to be part of the community. Yet they often do so by analogy, not directly or in ways that could be seen as confrontational. Take Victory Church’s OVT, “Reichmann Family: Saturday Night Church” for example. Facing the need for current church members to alter their worship routines, leadership could have made a direct appeal to the congregation to demand conformity to organizational demands. Instead, they deployed an OVT that depicted how one family decided to alter their worship routine and, as a result, discovered a profound sense of spiritual fulfillment. Though more research is necessary to determine whether or not this approach is empirically effective, the potential for social change is great.

Another common trope in OVTs involves promoting tithing and financial generosity. Sometimes viewers are explicitly exhorted to give. One video analyzed in the content analysis phase of this thesis-project was very direct: “And at this time of the year we just call on all the members of [church name redacted] to be faithful in your giving as we approach year end. Uh, join us uh in being faithful to God because God is faithful to us.” Green Hills Baptist Church’s OVT, “Tom & Cathy Edison Testimony”, is another example, although the appeal for financial generosity is softened by placing it alongside appeals for other forms of giving: “If giving financially is your gift, then give generously. If giving of your time... is your gift, then give generously. If prayer is your gift, pray faithfully.” Other OVTs however are less explicit. Green Hills Baptist’s “Don and Lisa Matthews” does not explicitly invite viewers to make a financial contribution to the church at all. Instead, it shows how one couple received spiritual and material blessing as a result of their decision to give: “My finances are in place, my debt has come down, and we’ve truly been blessed financially ever since I started giving.” However it is presented, this storytelling trope helps an OVT perform a vital social function. Financial contributions are key mechanisms of establishing social connections with an organization; as much as it is an act of supporting a common cause, a financial gift also signals to others that he or she identifies with the church. Encouraging generosity via OVTs is more than a matter of ensuring the bills get paid – it is a way to invite viewers to cross group boundaries to announce publicly that they belong.

But are these “indirect” narrative approaches consistent with faithful Christian practice? To some, aligning relationships and tinkering with social configurations may seem manipulative. But inducing social change or altering behavior through storytelling occurs in Scripture, namely in the interaction between Nathan and King David. In 2 Samuel 12, Nathan faced the challenge of confronting the King, and as was shown in chapter 3, Nathan faced an uneasy power imbalance as the king’s ascendancy threatened to squelch the prophetic voice in Israel. Recognizing that a direct confrontation with David would not end well, Nathan instead opted to use a story to leverage what little power he had into a dramatic change in royal behavior. Storytelling for Nathan was a shrewd

decision, and it can indeed be the same for church leadership today looking for ways to guide a congregation towards faithful forms of life.

Other OVTs seem to take an interest in depicting the church in a specific way. At Grace Church, OVTs make the argument that the church is a small family church where members are known intimately by others, even senior leadership. In actuality, Grace Church boasts thousands of members across several campuses in multiple states – a far cry from the idyllic church described in “Sharon’s Story”: “It feels like a small church. We all know each other. I feel like everybody hugs you, everybody loves you.” Such claims are understandable, however. For the past several decades, megachurches have faced nagging criticism that it’s too easy to get lost in the crowd, and that the giant auditoriums, dim lighting, and general unavailability of pastoral leadership can make the church feel cold, even inhospitable to people looking for Christian community. OVTs that depict intimacy and vibrant relationships should be read in light of these criticisms, as attempts to emphasize the warm, caring character of the congregation.

Similarly, many OVTs show or name the church’s lead pastor in an attempt to define his² role within the congregation. In large churches, the lead pastor is a celebrity, appearing prominently on venue video screens and in church publications. He is usually too busy to perform visitation or other one-on-one pastoral duties, and as a result, may seem inaccessible to many within the congregation. OVTs can demonstrate, however, that the lead pastor – though most will never meet him face-to-face – is indeed an integral part of an individual’s personal spiritual growth. Subjects depicted in all OVTs at Grace Church, for instance, explicitly thank the senior pastors by name for “changing our lives”, even though the videos usually lack any specific details about their relationship. Instead, the OVTs brush over the pastor’s inaccessibility by asserting that he can still have a profound impact on the viewer even if they never meet.

² Lead pastors in evangelical megachurches are almost exclusively male.

Incidentally, the Apostle Paul faced similar accusations that the persona conveyed in his letters overstated who he actually was: “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible,” (2 Corinthians 10:10). Perhaps a modern-day version of this complaint could read, “The pastor preaches powerfully, but I don’t feel like I can have a conversation with him. He doesn’t care about my personal spiritual life.” Paul addresses his critics by claiming that “what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present” (2 Corinthians 10:11), arguing that his personal authority was just as robust as his letters presumed. OVTs make similar claims: the lead pastor is indeed caring and available to church members, and his public persona is reflective of who he actually is. OVTs remind viewers of the pastor’s central role in leading spiritual growth, and that leadership is just as valid whether or not he is sitting next to a hurting family in a hospital waiting room or preaching on a video screen from several states away.

OVTs refine personal and organizational identities

OVTs depict “who we are” as a church, as well as demonstrate how individuals understand their own identity in light of the gospel. In fact, corporate or organizational identity construction is among the most common functions in OVTs. Identity markers appear frequently – for instance, the name of the church, footage of church members or buildings, church websites, and church logos are all common elements of OVTs that make claims about a congregation’s distinctive corporate identity. Particularly, including footage of a worship service is a principal mechanism of identity construction. Through centuries of Christian history, churches have made use of a dizzying array of liturgical forms and worship styles. For an outsider wondering what to expect at a new church, even a short clip of a worship service can convey an enormous amount of detail about the culture, values, and overall identity of the church: Do they sit in pews? What is the racial makeup of the congregation? Are the lights dim like a concert? Does the preacher wear a robe? What symbols or rituals are important here? Will the sermon be boring? Are they old and stuffy or young and hip? These questions are rarely answered explicitly but the medium of film

allows OVT producers to drop in clues for viewers so they can build a working understanding of the church's core identity.

Similarly, OVTs convey information about the church's corporate identity by featuring subjects who have been part of the congregation for a long time. Coastal Church's "Heroes" series, for instance, highlights volunteers who have made exceptional contributions to the life of the church. "Kim Saunders: Coastal Hero" performs two functions – it describes why the church looks like it does today (women's ministries are thriving because Kim said "yes" to God) and it invites others to mimic her example ("There is still much to be done..."). Nearly one third of all OVTs in the content analysis phase of this thesis-project depicted a subject who explicitly identified themselves as a longtime part of the congregation.

Personal identity construction is also a frequent theme of OVTs. Conversion stories are common – occurring in one quarter of all OVTs studied in the content analysis phase of this thesis-project – and often depict how a subject came to a fuller understanding of his or her identity in Christ. For instance, "Veronica's Story", an OVT produced by Southside Christian Church, explains how one woman enlarged her self-understanding as a result of her spiritual growth: "I've been more free to be who I am creatively, and I wasn't able to do that until I gave up holding onto... what I wanted." Coastal Church goes a step further, providing a script that helps congregants map their faith journey onto a four part narrative grid. As noted in chapter 2, the act of sharing one's biography enables a storyteller to foreground, background, emphasize, or altogether omit elements from his identity – to quite literally re-actualize one's self through story by presenting a specific identity to the world. Even if given a much larger narrative framework – ten parts instead of four, or even a hundred – the storyteller would still be forced to pick and choose a mere handful of meaningful moments from a lifetime of lived experience. Thus any time a narrator presents his story, it represents a constructed persona, intentionally crafted to present the narrator in a particular light.

Moreover, conversion stories are often highly stylized, using vivid language and sharp binary contrasts to demonstrate the degree of spiritual transformation. Faith Community Church's OVT, "Stan Eggers", uses rich metaphorical language to describe Stan's conversion – his soul was once raging like the sea on the television show "Deadliest Catch", but now is serene like the smooth surface of a calm lake. Parallels can be drawn with the New Testament's highly stylized language about the Apostle Paul's conversion:

I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:13-17)

Such language not only reflects the narrator's personal identity construction, but it is also instructive for other members of the community, showing them how to follow in his footsteps, so to speak. In this sense, this type of stylized conversion language also assists in the process of corporate identity construction – the biography provides behavioral cues that other members may imitate.

Other OVTs describe restored marriages and reunited families as a result of spiritual transformation. Grace Church's "Sharon's Story" and West Side's "Testimony – Martinez" are just two of many examples of OVTs that present models of "who we are", or more accurately, what values we embrace. While these OVTs demonstrate values and practices (see below) this is a reflexive process where those values and behaviors in turn shape the contours of a church's identity. In a culture where problem-saturated stories about broken marriages and dysfunctional families are the norm, OVTs present unique outcomes that feature families engaging in a countercultural lifestyle. They live different because, as the logic of an OVT goes, they *are* different due to the sanctifying grace of God. Their behaviors and values have changed as a result of a change of identity – because they are now in Christ, they are free to live new lives. Some OVTs may even possess the ability to "evoke, and in a literal sense even reconstitute" a change in

identity.³ That is, OVTs can be powerful touchstone reminders of how God worked in the past, which provides new resolve to face present-day challenges.

OVTs Assign Meanings by Demonstrating Values and Practices

OVTs demonstrate practices in the hopes that they inspire viewers to emulate behaviors or embody certain values. At their most basic level, OVTs are springboard stories that invite viewers to interact with the story and draw his or her own conclusions. According to Stephen Denning, a springboard story can promote change by helping listeners engage in an inner dialogue with “the little voice in the head”. For instance, when Victory Church faced the challenge of convincing church members to switch to a new worship service, they deployed an OVT that simply showed one family’s decision to attend worship on Saturday. Rather than making a direct appeal to viewers, the video used a clever springboard story that can potentially lead viewers to ‘discover’ the idea on their own. As noted above, this sort of indirect approach is quite effective because it helps viewers take ownership of the idea: “And because the listeners have created the idea, they like it.”⁴

Similarly, Green Hills Church uses OVTs to expose its congregation to opportunities for international mission work in hopes that viewers will lend their support, either by donating money or personally traveling to a foreign country as a missionary. To meet these goals, Green Hills uses OVTs to tell Epic Stories. According to John O’Neil’s typology, Epic Stories combine elements of *color* like vividness and lyricism with elements of *need fulfillment*, which, as the term suggests,

³ Peter Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 118.

⁴ Stephen Denning, “Using Narrative as a Tool for Change,” in *Storytelling in Organizations: Why Storytelling is Transforming 21st Century Organizations and Management*, ed. John Seeley Brown et al. (Burlington, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005), 115.

reduce anxiety, stress or uncertainty.⁵ OVTs at Green Hills include a number of elements high in color, such as footage of exotic foreign lands with happy, smiling people presumably eager to welcome missionary visitors. They also feature subjects describing the thrill of sharing the Gospel with spiritually-hungry native peoples – even during a baseball game with Nicaraguans who “came from every different direction from the jungle”. Likewise, OVTs at Green Hills include elements geared towards need fulfillment. For instance, their videos show real, relatable people who discovered that international mission work is not as scary as it may seem to someone who has never travelled to a foreign country. In one OVT, Butler describes himself as a senior manager at his company who also enjoys taking mission trips. Like Butler, the viewer need not have special seminary training or devote her entire life to missionary work in order to participate.

OVTs can also demonstrate quite literally how to engage in certain rituals or practices. For instance, at Faith Community Church, “Kendra’s Story” used a minor character to demonstrate an evangelism technique. As noted earlier, the video uses metaphor to define an alternate reality for viewers so they can see the world in fresh ways. But the nameless neighbor demonstrates that evangelism need not be akin to handing out tracts or preaching on the street-corner. The neighbor, sensing Kendra’s spiritual malaise, simply invited her to dinner. This small, seemingly benign act turned out to be immensely meaningful for Kendra – as the video explains, it set her on a journey of spiritual transformation that led her into a vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ and prompted her to get more involved with the ministries of Faith Community Church. Presumably anyone watching “Kendra’s Story” has the capacity to invite a neighbor to dinner. While the video doesn’t explicitly ask viewers to do the same, the expectation is clear that viewers will “discover” the idea on their own.

Baptism footage is another common trope in OVTs. Although baptism is a ritual central to the Christian faith, it is often misunderstood. So first and foremost, by depicting the physical act of

⁵ John O’Neill, “The Role of Storytelling in Affecting Organizational Reality in the Strategic Management Process,” *Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management* 4 no.1 (Summer/Fall 2002): 3-15.

baptism, an OVT helps demystify the ritual for viewers who have never witnessed it. Viewers unsure of what to expect may be wary of signing up for a baptism class or coming forward to speak with a pastor. But seeing the mechanics of the ritual depicted in an OVT may be enough to motivate viewers to explore baptism more seriously.

More notably, OVTs convey certain theological values by presenting baptismal footage. Interestingly, every depiction of baptism in this thesis-project involved baptism by full immersion. No other mode of baptism appeared – such as sprinkling or pouring water over the head – and furthermore, no OVT depicted an instance of infant baptism. The homogeneity of baptismal practice is striking, and suggests that these OVTs come from a common set of theological assumptions about baptism. First of all, by not depicting infant baptism, these OVTs tacitly suggest that baptism (and perhaps even salvation itself) is a conscious choice that can only be made by a consenting adult. This understanding of baptism eschews a rich tradition of baptismal theology ascribed to by many mainline churches, where infant baptism represents the prevenient grace of God in a person's life. Moreover, baptism by full immersion is a practice commonly associated with less formal liturgical traditions, whereas baptism by sprinkling, for instance, is usually associated with Roman Catholic or other mainline churches. By showing only one mode of baptismal practice, churches position themselves within an ecclesiological landscape and tacitly distance themselves from more formal churches, perhaps as a way to suggest that their faith is more “real” than others'. In any case, OVTs demonstrate that baptism is an important step in a believer's spiritual growth. At Southside Christian Church, for example, “Jacob & Kirk's Story” demonstrates that baptism can prepare believers for trials and give them spiritual tools to overcome difficult times. This OVT teaches baptism is more than a symbolic step or empty ritual – it is the power of God available to any believer who demonstrates the genuineness of their faith by participating in the church's ministries.

OVTs also present a highly-moralized worldview where certain practices are denigrated and others are celebrated. For instance, divorce, drinking, and homosexuality are behaviors

characteristic of church outsiders, or as people living outside the will of God. Conversion almost always eradicates these kinds of behaviors, but when they don't, OVTs tend to include a subsequent "conversion" where the Holy Spirit purifies the subject of their sin once and for all. Other practices are presented as community standards to be imitated. Reading Scripture, for instance, is frequently celebrated in OVTs as a primary method of spiritual growth. Bibles appear on screen in many videos, and others depict subjects reading or reciting passages of Scripture. Other videos show spiritual and emotional healing that come as a result of congregational care. "The Mascot", produced by Coastal Church, depicts one man's journey from heroin addiction to sobriety and spiritual wholeness as a result of attending a friend's informal Bible study. This type of congregational-based spiritual care is a particularly valuable in a megachurch congregation where pastors may not have the time to connect with everyone personally. By teaching laypeople to offer pastoral care to each other, OVTs can activate a congregation's potential to become relatively self-sustaining.

Instructing believers how to live is surely a mark of faithful Christian practice, as Scripture and church history are brimming with examples of this kind of practical teaching. Much of the Torah, for instance, presents rules for living in exacting detail, while the New Testament similarly offers believers moral instruction in a variety of forms. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, for instance, is an excellent parallel to an OVT in this regard. While the Sermon on the Mount boldly endorses values and behaviors associated with ritual purity, it makes use of a number of literary tropes, such as hyperbole (Matthew 5:29-30), repetition (Matthew 5:7-10), and metaphor (Matthew 6:22-23). Despite these poetic devices, the passage is very clear about nature of the lifestyle God demands from believers. It creates meaning by presenting values and behaviors just like OVTs depict "ground rules" for Christian life and membership in a local church.

A Critical Assessment

While the evidence seems to confirm that OVTs are indeed examples of faithful Christian ministry, a critical assessment of these videos fails to resolve some important issues. First, as noted above, these videos are complex *double-voiced* discursive texts that layer the perspective of the local church on top of the perspective of the individual storyteller.⁶ More accurately, this thesis-project has shown that these videos typically incorporate the perspective of only a small group of video producers and staff pastors, not necessarily the perspective of the whole church. In fact, elder boards and senior pastors (presumably the most influential leaders in a given congregation) only have limited roles in the OVT production process. Moreover, these videos obscure the very fact that opinions, values, and perspectives within local churches are almost *never* entirely homogenous – especially in large megachurches where thousands of members are scattered across a wide geographical area. So at the very least, OVTs must be approached with a robust hermeneutic of suspicion and the acknowledgement that they do not represent *the* point of view of a local church (if a singular point of view ever existed in the first place). In many cases advanced discursive analytical methods may be necessary to parse fully parse the meanings within OVTs.

Secondly, OVTs seem more *aspirational* than they are *descriptive* – that is, they present a vision of a vibrant local church that embodies certain values and practices, but these vignettes may not necessarily reflect everyday, on-the-ground reality. For instance, Sharon boldly claims in one OVT that Grace Church “feels like a small church. We all know each other. I feel like everybody hugs you, everybody loves you.” But Grace Church is a congregation of several thousand people that meets in enormous auditoriums, and it would be naïve to assume that *every* visitor would agree with Sharon’s assessment. Instead, the OVT models a way of life for others to follow – it shows that warmth and intimacy are indeed possible, and even goes so far as to suggest concrete

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981).

behaviors that can make it a reality (“...everybody hugs you...”). The video presents reality not necessarily as it is, but as it could be. While such aspirational vision-casting can be effective, it is not hard to imagine how this tactic could become heavy-handed or coercive. For instance, there is a fine line between encouraging generosity and soliciting financial gifts, and churches may easily slip into modes of exhortation that come across as thinly veiled manipulation. Moreover, an OVT circulating on the Internet far removed from its original context within a worshipping community is even more prone to misinterpretation by viewers who don’t understand the theological basis of tithing. Thus, as François Cooren might say, OVTs are hybridized agents that incarnate the local church alongside human agents – they do many of the same things flesh-and-blood leaders do – and as such, they may have unintended consequences.⁷ Even if OVTs are intended as faithful ministry, their “ghostly” agency may inadvertently haunt the local church for years to come.

Finally, since the video producer is primarily responsible for shaping the final product of an OVT, it is imperative that churches invest in the spiritual and emotional health of their video producers and creative staff. The high turnover rate and perennial stress of artistic work is a hidden liability in local churches; after all, since these men and women have such an enormous impact on the continual reconstitution of the local church – they shape the stories that shape the congregation – their discontent can seep into their work, whether intentionally or not, and have a disastrous effect on the church’s overall culture. Pastors, of course, face similar hazards – an overworked, overstressed leader is naturally more prone to destructive behavior that can result in scandal and public disgrace. So just as churches have learned how to mitigate these risks by investing in retreats, continuing education, counseling, and personal growth for pastors, they may find extraordinary value in offering the same level of care for their video and creative staff.

⁷ François Cooren, “Textual Agency: How Texts Do Things in Organizational Settings,” *Organization* 11 no. 3 (2004).

Enabling Faithful Practice

By design, much of this research has focused on broad, generalized themes because very little data about OVTs has been available to date. While broad research can be helpful for defining the basic contours of a much larger phenomenon, it unfortunately does not provide a lot of empirical data that can be tested in a controlled setting. Thus, the first and most obvious takeaway from this thesis-project is the acknowledgement that much more research is necessary to understand how OVTs function in local churches. Whereas this research generalized OVT usage across many churches throughout the United States, future studies should focus more closely on local settings to understand how church size, denominational affiliation, congregational polity, and other factors impact the production and reception of OVTs.

Specifically, quantitative studies are needed to determine whether or not OVTs are effective communication tools. That is, can OVTs actually make a statistically significant impact on the life of a local church? Some answers to this question will be relatively simple to formulate – perhaps A/B trials could be used to determine if an OVT generates more small group signups than another communication method, or perhaps structured behavioral observations can provide data about a church's social dynamics. Other answers, however, will require more creative approaches. Taking a snapshot of the process of corporate identity construction, for instance, can be a challenging research task. Perhaps focus groups and targeted questionnaires can help researchers determine how OVTs shape the values and understandings of local congregations, and furthermore, how specific tropes and themes determine an OVT's overall impact on viewers.

These studies should be supplemented with additional qualitative research to understand the fine-grained mechanics of how OVTs actually produce meaning. Whereas this thesis-project primarily approached OVTs from a perspective informed by organizational communication and organizational storytelling, future research should utilize film theory, for instance, to understand how language, image composition, gender roles, music, genre, and other elements interact on screen to generate multivalent messages. Participant observation studies could also be leveraged to

flesh out the production process, and interviews with OVT subjects could be analyzed to tease apart “double voicings” embedded within OVTs (placing the broader organization’s words or values into the speech of an individual character within an OVT).

Finally, for local churches seeking to develop or expand their OVT production capability, the following section may be understood as the beginning of a best-practices document. These guidelines aren’t intended to be woodenly enforced rules for OVTs, nor are they closed to revision. Instead, based on the findings of this thesis-project, these best-practices can enable faithful ministry by helping churches capitalize on the success of other churches and avoid common pitfalls in the production process.

There is no one “right way” to use OVTs. Data shows that OVTs are somewhat evenly distributed among the four storytelling functions (define reality, align relationships, refine identities, and assign meanings). OVTs can perform any or all of these functions, so churches shouldn’t worry about relying too heavily on one type of video. Moreover, OVTs can be approached pragmatically or artistically – they can intentionally be used to promote specific programs and ministries, or they can “compete in the arena of ideas” through metaphor and other creative means. Finally, churches needn’t strive for Hollywood-grade production value all the time because simple, single-shot videos can be just as meaningful as professionally-produced OVTs.

Make a decision about an OVT’s purpose. If a church wants to use OVTs to promote a specific program or ministry, state that goal up front and make decisions appropriately during the production process. Alternatively, if a church wishes to “compete in the realm of ideas”, that too should be a stated goal. Subsequent decisions about staffing, resources, and financial commitments should always be made in light of the broader strategy. In any case, OVTs need not replace all video content. OVTs are just as common as sermon videos and promotional videos

Develop a framework to guide the production process. First, churches should think about where story “leads” come from and identify the multiple entry points into the production process. Campus pastors, hospitality team members, small group leaders, and office staff all serve in public-facing roles where they are likely to encounter ideas for OVTs – teach them to listen for stories and encourage them to “feel out” subjects’ willingness to record their story on film. The church website and in-worship communication cards are also effective channels for discovering leads, so ensure prompt follow-up takes place with anyone who responds via those methods. Ask potential subjects to complete a questionnaire to help both church staff and the subject begin putting the story into a succinct format. Video producers should communicate with the subject before filming to not only build rapport, but also enable the subject to “practice” portions of their story. Some subjects will find it beneficial to script out their entire story beforehand, even if they do not read it verbatim during filming. Video production staff should use a storyboard, script, or at minimum, a list of questions to get a general idea of the final product before filming begins in order to guide the process as efficiently as possible. Filming should take place in a location where the subject is comfortable, and plenty of time should be allotted to the filming process. If possible, schedule a follow-up filming session 1-2 weeks later to reshoot any portions that were not captured during the initial session.

Keep a realistic timeline. For the sake of everyone involved in the production process, plan ahead for delays, scheduling conflicts, technical issues, and other unforeseen complications. Work backwards from the anticipated debut date to ensure the OVT can be completed in time – first, ensure the final cut of the video is finished at least a week before it debuts, then allot at least a week before for editing, color grading, audio mixing, and post-production. Filming could take as long as a week or two, and pre-production, storyboarding, and other planning tasks may take as long as three to four weeks. Ideally, OVT planning should begin at least 6-7 weeks before it is scheduled to debut.

Obey the genre’s guidelines. OVTs are typically around 2-5 minutes in length, although they can exceed these guidelines if the story needs more or less time. The videos almost always include one or two subjects, and they use an average of five storytelling tropes per video.

Deploy OVTs appropriately. Across the board, most OVTs are produced for use in worship, so videos should be appropriate for display in a church’s particular worship setting. Production staff should make sure the video is not too long, objectionable content is edited out, and audio levels are comfortable. Churches should also recognize that many OVTs have a second life on the Internet and on social media, where viewers may have no connection with the local church that produced the video. OVTs that are released on the Internet should tell stories “that cast a vision of who God is, not how great [the] church is”

Use staff appropriately. OVT production is heavily staff-driven, and is rarely done “by committee”. Media and communication staff members should be most involved, while the role of elder boards or other oversight committees should be limited. This can preserve a degree of artistic freedom and help the filmmaker produce a tight video package. Volunteers can be a valuable asset, especially in churches where resources are thin. Teenagers with an interest in film can be used to assist in the production process, however they should be given close supervision by creative staff.

Recognize the unique gifts, skills, and needs of video production staff. Producing video content is a time-intensive process that can quickly become overwhelming, and may eventually lead to burnout. Video production is a specialized discipline distinct from other types of video work, so whenever possible, running cameras or switchers for live services should be left to other personnel. Pastors and other church leadership must recognize that video production staff have unique needs in order to do their jobs well – they should “play long ball” with their video staff to

set them up for long-term fruitfulness. Ideally, video producers should be directly supervised by other creative staff who understand the ebbs and flows of the creative process. These creative leaders should help producers “not be so dumb” by giving them structure and direction, but not in ways that stifle creativity. At the same time, video producers may need to be challenged to push creative boundaries, or to “have guts”.

Allow OVTs to lead. OVTs can perform valuable leadership functions in congregations. Specifically, they can define reality, align relationships, refine identities, and assign meanings. OVTs can do this work without being explicit or seeming overly contrived. In fact, OVTs that indirectly invite viewers to digest a story and draw their own conclusions may hold as much potential to lead a congregation as any flesh-and-blood leader. Allow OVTs to tell stories that “cast a vision of who God is, not how great your church is” because enabling viewers to encounter what God is doing in the world is the most effective way to ensure faithful ministry practice in the local church.

APPENDIX A

CODING SCHEME WITH EXAMPLES

<u>Code</u>	<u>Category</u>	<u>Example</u>
(C14): Does subject describe a tactile sensation from God?	Define	(Video #71): "I felt this peace come over me and this warmth and I felt like [God] was just hugging me"
(C15): Does subject hear God?	Define	(Video #45): "God says you know my son choose yourself this day whom will you serve, you know. And so as I heard his words you know, an audible voice"
(C21): Does subject have a supernatural understanding of event?	Define	(Video #136): "The fact that I'm alive that I somehow am one of the very small percentage of people that can claim recovery from such an awful disease ... is all a miracle only possible from the only one who gives life"
(C23): Does the subject use a metaphor or simile to describe life, event, or situation?	Define	(Video #36): "That's like those crosses it's like my life he is just nipping away with the stuff that don't need to be there to create in me the man ... that he wants me to be"
(C25): Does subject use language about God's purpose, plan, or will?	Define	(Video #128): "It's not a coincidence like God placed all these different people and things in my life for a reason"
(C29): Does subject talk about heaven, hell, or eternity?	Define	(Video #112): "I know that my child is whole and in heaven with Jesus one day I will meet her face to face and her death will not be in vain"
(C31): Are experts such as doctors proven wrong about something?	Define	(Video #40): "I was given 6 months to live... That's what they say ...So don't be concerned what they say be concerned with what the word of God says"
(C2): Does lead pastor (or other prominent pastor) appear in the video?	Align	(Video #121): "My escape was church and the pastors were loving and kind and caring and helping me get through it since they've both been through it they were there for me and answering questions and helping me get through it"

(C3): Is (senior or other prominent) pastor mentioned by the subject?	Align	(Video #122): “Thank you pastor David and pastor Nicole for not just being my pastor but for being a spiritual mother and father for us and for always thinking of us and helping us and loving us cause I love you guys too”
(C8): Is a church program or ministry seen or mentioned?	Align	(Video #37): “Coming to Alpha and arriving in our small groups and once we got to know each other it just it felt like a safe place for all of us to express our thoughts our concerns any problems we were dealing with”
(C10): Does subject exhort the congregation?	Align	(Video #74): “And at this time of the year we just call on all the members of [church name redacted] to be faithful in your giving as we approach year end. Uh join us uh in being faithful to God because God is faithful to us”
(C11): Does the subject exhort people outside the church or the general public?	Align	(Video #134): “Just like Jesus saved me he can do it he will he did it for me and he can do it for y’all”
(C22): Is the word tithing said or seen?	Align	(Video #97): “I think for um Lyndon um and me we take it for granted that people struggle with tithing just because it was never an issue with us”
(C30): Does subject mention another church or ministry experience, perhaps in childhood?	Align	(Video #119): “I was raised in the Catholic faith and and uh and it to to some extent it was certainly knew the Lord but um the whole idea of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ was a new concept to me”
(C18): Does the subject say the name of the church?	Refine	(Video #43): “It’s not about [church name redacted] this and [church name redacted] did this and [church name redacted] did that it’s about how how did [church name redacted] lead you to God and how did [church name redacted] help you you know build your relationship with God”
(C4): Does any part of the church building appear (including footage from a worship service)?	Refine	(Video #83): “There are few greater feelings that are as gratifying as as tangibly creating a structure um a house um a building especially a building place of worship”

(C5): Has the subject attended this church for a while?	Refine	(Video #54): "I was there at the [redacted] campus when Rick kinda talked about you know um expanding the church and growing the church and going to 10 different cities and and that opportunity"
(C16): Does church logo appear?	Refine	(Video #81): "[Share your story with us. Whether it's a Tweet/Status/Video/Picture, we want to know your story!]"
(C17): Does church website or hashtag appear?	Refine	(Video #127): "[To find more information about Dwell go to [website redacted]]"
(C20): Does subject describe a discrete moment when she crossed line of faith?	Refine	(Video #77): "One morning during the music, I asked Jesus into my heart as my lord and savior. The change was instant"
(C27): Does subject describe a familial relationship with God (as a son/daughter, etc) or with church family?	Refine	(Video #101): "I am a a product of teenagers they were my mom was 16 and my father was uh 14 all I had to do was be a child of Christ and allow him to uh transform my heart"
(C9): Is baptism footage seen?	Assign	(Video #68): "Well Kimmy because you have an obedience to the Lord's command I baptize you now in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost"
(C12): Is Bible read, quoted, or paraphrased?	Assign	(Video #88): "You know I I read the whole book of John and towards the end it I just remember Jesus tells the disciples he's like I have to leave but I'm gonna send the spirit of truth is gonna come he's gonna come speak truth to you and convict you of sin"
(C13): Does a Bible physically appear on screen?	Assign	(Video #73): "Couple days go by and I noticed a Bible on the nightstand and it had been there for several several years"
(C24): Does the video demonstrate evangelism in some way?	Assign	(Video #124): "Evangelism with me and him was extremely relational; little did I know if somebody would have told me for the next 10 years I'd be pouring my heart out um to him and begging God um to save his soul I would have been like there's no way"

(C26): Does the subject describe a former illicit lifestyle (drugs, alcohol, homosexuality, extramarital affair, etc)?	Assign	(Video #105) “You know drug addiction alcoholism ran through our our veins and uh I quickly turned to the streets to find validation and uh you know that got me involved with friends and girls drugs and money quickly became my affirmation and my pleasure uh in and out of jail um using and selling to support my habit”
(C28): Does video show footage of or discuss a mission trip or local service project?	Assign	(Video #66): “Every year at [redacted] on spring break they take the high school ministry down to Mexico building houses, playing with the kids”
(C32): Does subject receive care and healing from others in the congregation?	Assign	(Video #39): “The ladies would come up to me ... and just kinda take pull me aside and just whisper in my ear like hey I’ve been thinking about you a lot did you have a good week?”

APPENDIX B

REPRODUCTION OF ONLINE SURVEY

Online Video Testimonies

Instructions:

This questionnaire explores how Online Video Testimonies are used in the local church. For each question, answer for the local church where you are employed or where you spend most of your time as a volunteer. This survey should take 3-5 minutes to complete.

Statement of Consent:

This study is being conducted by Chris Willard, a Doctor of Ministry candidate at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. All of your answers will be kept strictly confidential. Any information you choose to provide will be presented in summary form in combination with the responses from other participants in this study. The answers that you give will never be linked with your name. By completing this questionnaire, you have given your consent that you are a voluntary participant in this study.

Visit www.ovts.org for more info or to contact the researcher.

** Required*

1) How many people typically attend worship at this church in any given weekend? *

2) The main campus of this church... *

- ☐ ... is located within the United States
- ☐ ... is located in Canada
- ☐ ... is located somewhere else in the world

3) Describe your employment status with this church *

- ☐ I work full-time for this church
- ☐ I work part-time for this church
- ☐ I contract or do ad hoc projects for this church (for which I am paid)
- ☐ I volunteer for this church (and I am not paid by this church)

4) What kind of work you do for this church (select all that apply):

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Video production | <input type="radio"/> Pastoral (associate or other) |
| <input type="radio"/> Print communication | <input type="radio"/> Administrative assistant |
| <input type="radio"/> Social media | <input type="radio"/> Youth/children's ministry |
| <input type="radio"/> Pastoral (lead pastor) | <input type="radio"/> Audio/recording production |

5) How does this church share online video content? (select all that apply):

- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ Vimeo
- ☐ Through our church website
- ☐ Through our mobile app
- ☐ Through another website or service
- ☐ This church doesn't share online video content

6) What kinds of videos does this church typically share on the Internet? (select all that apply):

- ☐ Sermon videos
- ☐ Sermon previews or snippets
- ☐ Worship music videos
- ☐ OVTs
- ☐ Pastor's blog
- ☐ News/events promos
- ☐ Sermon illustrations
- ☐ "Behind the scenes" or entertainment videos
- ☐ Other

7) Which kind of video usually earns the most feedback at your church? (likes, shares, comments, etc)

- ☐ Sermon videos
- ☐ Sermon previews or snippets
- ☐ Worship music videos
- ☐ OVTs
- ☐ Pastor's blog
- ☐ News/events promos
- ☐ Sermon illustrations
- ☐ "Behind the scenes" or entertainment videos
- ☐ Not sure
- ☐ Other:

8) On which social media sites does this church maintain an account? (select all that apply):

- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ Vimeo
- ☐ Vine
- ☐ Instagram

9) Does this church use Online Video Testimonies as a part of its communication strategy?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Yes, at one time in the past
- ☐ No, but we plan to in the future
- ☐ No
- ☐ I'm not sure

10) In the past year, how many OVTs has this church produced?

11) If you track views of your OVTs, how many people have viewed your church's most popular OVT?

12) Which statement BEST DESCRIBES your church's use of OVTs?

- ☐ This church produces OVTs primarily to be shown in worship
- ☐ This church produces OVTs primarily to be shared online
- ☐ This church doesn't produce OVTs

13) When this church produces OVTs, how involved are each of the following: *

	Very involved	Somewhat involved	Occasionally involved	Not involved at all	Not sure or N/A
a) Church media production staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b) Outside consultants or paid contractors	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c) Church communications staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d) Lead pastor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e) Other pastoral staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f) Elder board or church oversight board	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g) Volunteer video/communications team	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14) Where do OVT ideas come from in this church? *

[illegible]

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never	Not applicable/not sure	Our church doesn't use OVTs
f) Connection cards received during worship	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

15) When your church produces OVTs, describe the PRIMARY role each of the following people have:

	Approves final product	Initiates project	Writes or edits the script	Offers other input	Not involved in the production process	Our church doesn't use OVTs
a) Lead pastor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b) Other pastoral staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c) Media or communications staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d) Elder board or church oversight board	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

16) Are you willing to be contacted to provide more information about OVTs at your church? If so, enter your email address:

17) Church name (optional)

18) Church website (optional)

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